Voices of Peace

Stories of Conscientious Objectors from Europe and Beyond

Quaker Council for European Affairs

Connection e.V.

AGIR POUR LA PAIX

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Quaker Council for European Affairs

Square Ambiorix 50
1000 Brussels
Belgium

www.qcea.org

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About the Publication:

Voices of Peace is a publication by the **Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)**, **War Resisters' International (WRI)**, **Connection e.V.** and **Agir pour la Paix**. It brings together the personal stories of conscientious objectors with a particular focus on the European region. In this publication, we seek to bring forward the stories of those who refuse participation in war, amplify their voices, and contribute to building an alternative culture of peace.

Authors

Celina Bebenek (Quaker Council for European Affairs), **Andrew de Sousa** (Quaker Council for European Affairs), **Zaira Zafarana** (Connection e.V.), **Semih Sapmaz** (War Resisters International) and **Natalia García Cortés** (War Resisters International).

Editorial support: **Julia Montier** (Agir Pour La Paix), **Charlène Poupon Brengel** (Agir Pour La Paix), **Mikheil Elizbarashvili** (Peace and Service Network), **Gill Alcock** and **Kate McNally**.

Translation of Pourquoi je refuse d'être soldat (Why I refuse to be a soldier) by Jean Van Lierde: **Daniel Flynn**

Design: **Beatrice Romagnoli** & **Celina Bebenek.**

About Our Organisations:

Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA): QCEA was founded by members of the Religious Society of Friends in 1979. Its mission is to bring a vision for peace, justice and equality to Europe and its institutions.

War Resisters' International (WRI): a global pacifist and antimilitarist network with over 80 affiliated groups in 40 countries. WRI is committed to its 1921 founding declaration that says: 'War is a crime against humanity. I am therefore determined not to support any kind of war, and to strive for the removal of all causes of war'.

Connection e.V.: a German-based organisation founded in 1993 that supports conscientious objectors and deserters from around the world; it has dedicated programs on asylum and international advocacy for conscientious objectors to military service, and it has received several recognitions for its work.

Agir pour la Paix: a pacifist, anti militarist and non-violent organisation. Their activism is mainly through popular education, notably in offering workshops on civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. Agir pour la Paix was founded by peace activists, amidst them was Jean Van Lierde.

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Why do these Stories Matter?

The world is growing more militarised, with ongoing conflicts, wars across regions, and the rise of far-right governments. Security is increasingly framed in military terms, where higher military spending, more weapons, and more people taking up arms are presented as solutions to today's crises. Yet many people refuse to be part of this militarised logic and choose to say "no" to the cycle of violence.

This publication shares stories from conscientious objectors who made that choice.

Conscientious objectors are people who refuse the war system. This can mean refusing to serve, wanting to leave the army after joining, refusing to be enlisted, refusing to train for war, or refusing to support or take part in any war activities.

The right to conscientious objection to military service is a human right inherent in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art. 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Art. 10(2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU).

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has, for instance, explicitly clarified that "The right to conscientious objection should be recognised for conscripts, for professional members of the armed forces and for reservists" (A/HRC/41/23, A/HRC/50/43) and has stressed, "States should respect and protect the rights of conscientious objectors arriving from third States, including through adherence to the principle of non-refoulement and international human rights and refugee law and the implementation and dissemination of guidance on the interpretation of applicable international law, such as the UNHCR guidelines on international protection on claims to refugee status related to military service." (A/HRC/56/30)

People who refuse military service are often seen as traitors, weak, or unpatriotic. This stigma can impact them, their families, and their communities. In many countries, refusing military service can lead to serious and lasting consequences, and some of them are forced to leave the country. Often, their stories are overlooked or even silenced.

This publication aims to change that by sharing the voices of conscientious objectors and focusing on the human side of the issue (which is often overlooked today as AI-generated content increases). It also celebrates their resistance and their free will.

We invite you to read their stories and listen to their voices.

Note on Quakers and Conscientious Objection

Quakers have a long tradition of speaking out against war and conscription. Since the 1600s, they have believed that everyone carries a spark of God, so taking a human life is not acceptable. From World War I onwards, Quakers often refused military service and led peace efforts in many countries. Some of their key projects were the Friends Ambulance Unit, which cared for hundreds of thousands of patients and refugees across Europe, and the War Victims Relief Committee, which rebuilt villages and provided food for one million people in Eastern Europe. They also advocated for a conscience clause in Britain's 1916 Military Service Act, which was the first law to recognise conscientious objection.

Note on Methodology

This is a storytelling project based on eight interviews conducted between 20 February and 14 April 2026 with participants from Spain, Finland, Greece, Türkiye, Israel, Russia, and Eritrea. In some cases, we use pseudonyms to protect participants' and their families' safety. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and lightly edited for length and clarity.

We also included an English translation of 'Why I Refuse to be a Soldier' by Jean Van Lierde (first published in 1951) on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth, on 15 February 1926 in Charleroi.

This publication focuses on Europe rather than taking a global perspective. Even when we share stories about people from countries like Eritrea, these accounts are connected to Europe, such as highlighting the experiences of migrants living here.

Jean

Why I refuse to be a soldier?

Translation to English from the original French of "*Pourquoi je refuse d'être soldat*" by Jean Van Lierde (1926-2006), on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Jean refused to serve his conscription duties and, as a result, was imprisoned and then prosecuted by the Military Court of Brussels on October 3rd, 1951.

Confronting this assembly of military men, he declared the following :

"Gentlemen,

I would first like to recall a few facts that motivated your decision to bring me before you again. I would like to repeat that, if in your eyes I am a militiaman, considered legally as such, it is due to fraud. I never endorsed military law. The reading of it, done in front of me by an officer, automatically transformed me into a soldier. However, it is essential to emphasise that at the Namur barracks, this operation was carried out by physical coercion (similar to fascist methods).

You must therefore know, in order to dispel any confusion, that you have no authority over me. I am a civilian and do not recognise the military hierarchy. I deny your right to judge me as a soldier.

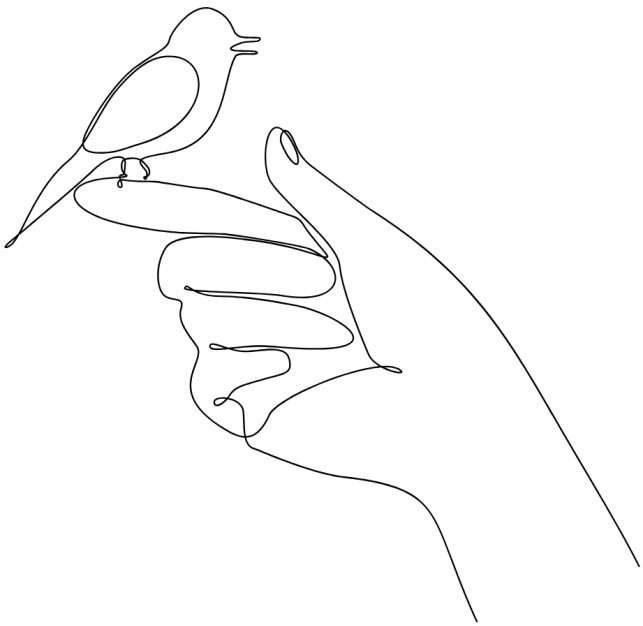
However, since the Military Court is a reality that I cannot ignore, I will "play along" by making this Kantian distinction : Respect is always due to persons, never to things.

This means that I am addressing you as men and not as officers. I would be sinning against the individual if I cornered a being into identifying themselves with one of their roles.

It is your conscience that interests me, not your uniforms or titles. Dialogue requires this basic condition, basic because it must go beyond the closed morality of the Penal Code.

Gentlemen,

I bear no animosity toward anyone ; all men are my brothers. If my words are harsh, see in them only the intensity of my convictions. In the past, like you, I believed in armed resistance and its forms of heroism. I now understand that I can no longer be complicit in its violence, reprisals, and settling of scores. Allow me to tell you honestly what I think and the reasons for my attitude.



But first, as before the Military Court of Liège, and, even if this may seem strange to you, I am going to "reverse the roles," substituting the prosecution for the defence and openly denouncing the "techniques of debasement" used by the Military Court against the conscience of objectors.

As Marcel Gabriel wrote "[A technique of degradation is] a whole body of methods deliberately put into operation in order to attack and destroy in human persons, belonging to some definite class or other, their self-respect, and in order to transform them little by little into mere human waste products, conscious of themselves as such, and in the end forced to despair of themselves, not merely at an intellectual level, but in the very depths of their souls."[1]

You, the Military Court, representing the State, fulfil your role as persecutors "who strive to destroy in the pacifist the consciousness, illusory or not, that this being has of his own worth." Through repeated repression and successive imprisonments, you have to turn him into an exhausted wreck who surrenders to the authorities, fully aware that he has become a wreck. Why this last condition? First, because it is the only way for the State to have him at its mercy. Need we recall the trials in the East, in Franco's Spain, in the Axis countries, or in royalist Greece, which, only yesterday, were shooting objectors ? On the other hand, the persecuting State (i.e., each one of you) "reinforces itself in the feeling of its own superiority" if it sees its degraded victim renounce his individuality, "for it will then find it right to have treated him with severity. This is the "hideous vicious circle" denounced by the reflections of philosophers and the uncompromising attitude of Christian or anti-authoritarian objectors.

Your sole aim : to break me down after long periods of detention, and then see me accept the uniform of legal killers. You have this power to continue dragging me into your prisons, amid incredible human distress, but it is my body that you chain; my ideals you cannot take away from me. For us, conscientious objectors, on the condition that we remain true to ourselves, your law provides for twenty years in prison (even more than war criminals, who have already been released). Such means at your disposal are one of the dramatic aspects of the growing totalitarianism of our time.

Only free men can halt this hellish slide towards robotisation and collective stagnation. "The State fears only one rival: man," proclaims Bernanos. "I say the free man, not the rationalist or the brute, the man who gives himself or refuses himself, but who never lends himself." In the tradition of Socrates, Proudhon, Bakunin, Bloy, Tolstoy, Romain Roland, and Huxley, he says:

> "In the past, like you, I believed in armed resistance and its forms of heroism. I now understand that I can no longer be complicit in its violence, reprisals, and settling of scores."

I PREFER TO SEE THE WORLD RISK ITS SOUL THAN DENY IT.

These admirable words sum up the wager on the Spirit contained in non-violence, the basis of militant pacifism. I am a Catholic, a son of

1. Marcel, Gabriel. "Mass Against Society." Translated by G. S. Fraser. Indiana: Gateway Editions, Ltd., 2008.

the universal (i.e., supranational) Church and a member of War Resisters' International, whose Declaration of Principles I have unequivocally signed:

"War is a crime against humanity. For this reason, we are determined not to assist in any kind of war and to fight for the abolition of all its causes."

It is not out of a taste for paradox that I will quote a disturbing text by Friedrich Nietzsche in which he denounces armed peace as an inhumanity as harmful and even worse than war.

The doctrine of the army as a means of self-defence must be abjured as completely as the lust of conquest. Perhaps a memorable day will come when a nation renowned in wars and victories, distinguished by the highest development of military order and intelligence, and accustomed to make the heaviest sacrifice to these objects, will voluntarily exclaim, "We will break our swords," and will destroy its whole military system, lock, stock, and barrel. Making ourselves defenceless (after having been the most strongly defended) from a loftiness of sentiment—that is the means towards genuine peace, which must always rest upon a pacific disposition. The so-called armed peace that prevails at present in all countries is a sign of a bellicose disposition, of a disposition that trusts neither itself nor its neighbour, and, partly from hate, partly from fear, refuses to lay down its weapons. Better to perish than to hate and fear, and twice as far better to perish than to make oneself hated and feared—this must some day become the supreme maxim of every political community! (…) The tree of military glory can only be destroyed at one swoop, with one stroke of lightning."[2]2

This passionate appeal means that the people must now put more strength and audacity into taking the risk of peace than was once needed to try their luck at war.

Overcoming war from above is the pacifist attitude. Mobilisation is starting from below. Squeamish pacifism, it has sometimes been said. For us, revolutionary pacifists, this is not a matter of romanticism, for "non-violence is no more related to cowardice than chastity is to impotence" (Thibon).

The "heights" Nietzsche spoke of are, for us, the fire of God's love. It is the abandonment of the Sword and the choice of the Cross. This is the meaning of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of that Faith against which all the violence of Empires is broken. To accept arms and participate in carnage is to spit upon Christ and descend to the level of the "enemy" by contracting the evil that gnaws at his soul. The appalling global toll is before our eyes, bearing merciless witness to this sad reality.

A professor at the University of Louvain, the great psychiatrist Etienne de Greeff, gave us scathing pages on the animal behaviour of patriotic herds. "War," he wrote in 1939, "from which man will inevitably emerge a little more enslaved, a little poorer… is in no way perceived by the masses in its true light. Everyone thinks that the enemy must be slain. But who is this enemy?… The enemy is the willing renunciation by millions of men of the autonomous life of the mind; it is the inescapable fact that millions of men, capable of fighting like heroes, have nothing to defend in the higher spheres of thought and will remain blind to the agony of the human person. The enemy is within us. It has been within us since the origin of the species, and it will survive Nazism".

And Professor de Greeff, like all humanists aware of the contemporary tragedy, turns to St. Francis of Assisi and Gandhi, discovering in them the only path capable of morally saving humanity from total dullness and widespread enlistment.

I now leave the field of spiritual combat and moral resistance to delve into sociological realities. Pacifism is a choice of Truth and a wager on the Spirit, but it requires an indispensable complement: the struggle for Social Revolution. I am merely echoing economic concerns.

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2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits, Part II. Translated by Paul V. Cohn. New York: MacMillan Company, 1913. Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37841/37841-h/37841-h.html.

In this regard, I am a committed activist for a personalist and distributist socialism, fighting against capitalist and totalitarian structures. I consider trade unionism (not to be confused with the dismal reformism of current organisations) to be a key lever for overthrowing the economy of profit and scarcity. When its production exceeds the capacity of markets to absorb it (sluggish sales caused by a lack of purchasing power) and a terrible crisis ensues with millions of unemployed, there remains one solution to delay collapse: the arms race.

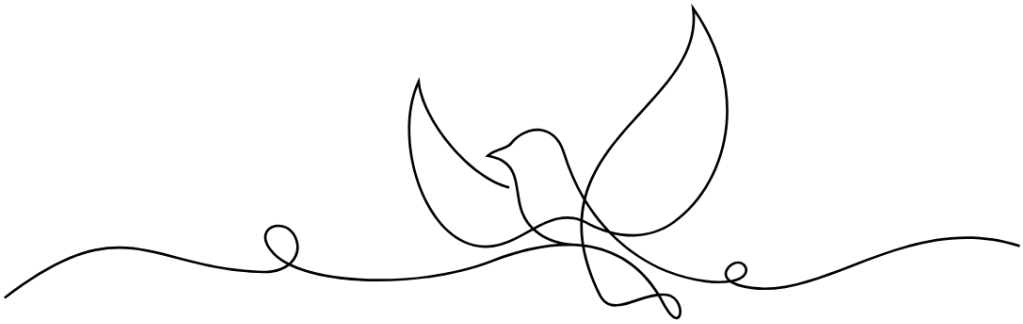
Capitalism needs war to save itself, mobilising masses of citizens who are tasked with consuming and destroying so that others can work. This insane delusion is still alive today, and it takes the arrogant cynicism of "distinguished and orthodox" economists to deny this fact.

Over-armament delivers purchasing power, thanks to the unprecedented production of war material, which, crucially, is referred to as the infamous phenomenon of "market stabilisation," as they say, which forced the destruction of crops while millions of people were dying. No one can ignore today that if peace were to "break out" tomorrow (leading to disarmament), we would witness the most formidable economic crisis imaginable, with unemployment rising in parallel with production, and posing the agonising problem of leisure and worker education.

The crime of the capitalist system is that it can distribute billions of dollars for free to destroy our cities and massacre creatures, while refusing to make the wealth of this prodigious industrial and agricultural production capacity available to the poor, black, yellow, or white, to ensure their fulfilment. The example of the torn-apart Korea (perhaps the Europe of tomorrow) makes this idea easy to understand. Half of the funds wasted unnecessarily on destroying it would have been enough to eliminate poverty and social injustice there and "thus remove communism's pretexts" (Maritain). Look at Europe, Africa, Asia and their multitudes of starving people and draw your own conclusions!

> "Pacifism is a choice of Truth and a commitment to the Spirit, but it requires an indispensable complement: the struggle for Social Revolution."

The Stalinist wave covers up our political and social failures and cowardice. The USSR remains a symbol of liberation for exploited peoples because the West did not have the courage to fulfil its revolutionary mission, and the war will not change anything; on the contrary, it will only accentuate the proletarianization of the masses. The military power of the Axis was



crushed, but Nazism corrupted the civilised world. In the same way, Stalinism would be defeated militarily, but Leninism would rot hearts in the most atrocious civil war.

The only effective ground on which we can, as of now, break the communist advance is that of economic and social justice, which will then deprive communist propaganda of its only asset, causing its own totalitarianism to collapse. This totalitarianism is invading our institutions because the Cold War is already the fatalistic acceptance of violent means to ensure peace, while at the same time mutilating human advancement. To defeat communism, we must remove its justifications and not criminally pursue, through overarmament, the ruin of Europe and the world, as we have been doing for forty years.

I oppose the madness of collective homicide with my moral and social veto. War is the tomb of Liberty, the rejection of socialist revolution, the negation of Spirit and Life, the betrayal of the catholicity of the Church, and a great insult to the Cross of Love. That is why I say NO to war. And if I refuse military service, which prepares for war, it is for the same reasons, considering, in addition, the army as a school of servility and degrading automatism, as the learning of murder, as a center of intellectual and moral prostitution, as a laboratory that anesthetizes consciences by cultivating the loss of the sense of guilt in men, thus allowing the bloody slaughter of millions of beings. Error will only be stripped from souls by placing the struggle at the level of the Spirit. Alas, our century, for perhaps the third time, and paradoxically in the name of Justice, will let out its horrible cry: Murder one another. “As in the past, in witchcraft trials, demons were burned and, by accident, so was the possessed person, to whom no harm was intended; this fundamental attitude persists.” (Étienne de Greeff).

The atomic idol, the litanies of incendiary napalm are all means accepted today to kill error and build Peace ! ! ! Only revolutionary non-violence can prevent the collective suicide of Humanity. You may call us utopians, but utopia is the name given to ideas that tomorrow will be the reality of life. You may accuse me of error. Well, even then, I prefer to be wrong in this utopia without killing anyone than to be right amid cemeteries and ruins.

I stand in solidarity with thousands of insurgents, rising up everywhere against the tyranny of States (both within and beyond the Iron Curtain), in solidarity with millions of oppressed people fighting against colonialist, capitalist, and totalitarian exploitation.

Conscientious objectors are community-minded individuals, communing with all the poor of the planet and trying, within the limits of their human frailties, to promote the moral advancement of humanity.”

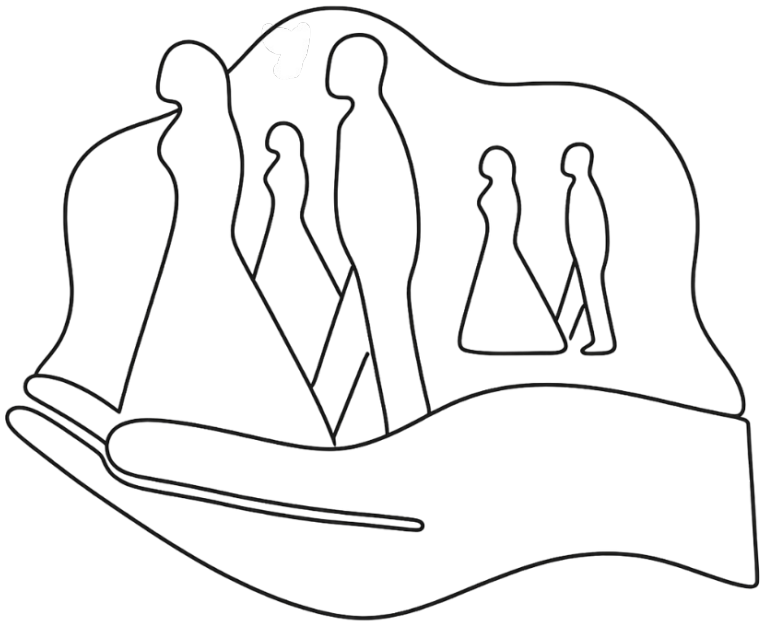
Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Belgium [3]

Belgium introduced compulsory military service in 1913, after previously using a system that let wealthier men pay to avoid service. Conscription was suspended in 1993, and the armed forces became fully professional and volunteer-based.

Currently, there is no recognition of the right to conscientious objection for professional soldiers or reservists. The Defence Minister Theo Francken plans to invite all 18-year-olds to consider military service, aiming to increase the number of reservists from about 6,600 to 20,000. In late 2025, the Ministry sent letters to approximately 149,000 young people (17-year-olds at the time) encouraging them to consider a voluntary military service year.

3. More information about how the right to refuse military service is applied and violated in Europe is available in the newly published ‘2025 Annual Report’ of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection.

“ Conscientious objectors are community-minded individuals, communing with all the poor of the planet and trying (...) to promote the moral advancement of humanity. ”



Theo

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I'm Theo, a 29-year-old conscientious objector from Greece. I grew up in a small town in northern Greece.

JOURNEY TOWARDS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

It has been a question in my head – as it is for many young men in Greece – since maybe middle school: what am I going to do when the time comes? The answers you get in a small town like mine are quite limited from other people. The internet helped me, though. Also, you sort of have an answer in yourself. Really, is a young man keen to do this?

I already had some sort of resistance to the idea of serving in the military back then. That was my introduction to the world of conscientious objection. I am generally interested in practical activism, and I want to see the world change. We all know that it's very hard to see the world change, though. So I'm always trying to find the little practical ways to help this change. But also, I'm always trying to find collective ways to act rather than an individualistic path.

DECIDING TO APPLY FOR ALTERNATIVE SERVICE

Initially, I considered other options that were sort of popular - and which are still popular. You always hear stories such as "Oh, I know somebody, and I will get a better placement", as in finding ways to escape the harshest conditions.

And then the other option could be to apply for a medical exemption on medical grounds.

It is sort of a way for the military in Greece to relieve some pressure coming from people who would be causing more trouble in the army camps… So you could get an exemption even if you wouldn't exactly fit the law's definition of being ineligible for the service. The idea was to sort of turn a blind eye to this practice and let people escape the service.

"I'm always trying to find the little practical ways to help this change. But also, I'm always trying to find collective ways to act rather than an individualistic path."

Definitely, there isn't any real information widely available about conscientious objection. It was more, I think, me just randomly bumping into blogs on the internet that talked about the

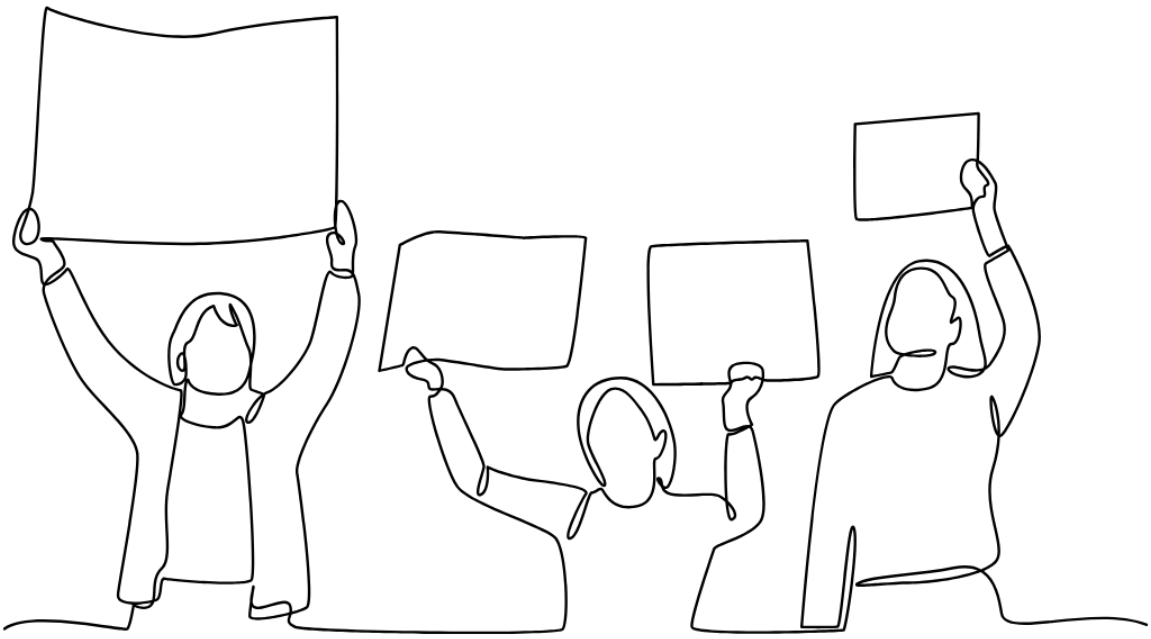
alternative service and how you could perform some months of service in the public sector for the public good. And that was very interesting to me.

I remember the moment that I decided to apply for an alternative service. Initially, I was also considering being a draft evader and living abroad. It's because of the punitive nature of alternative service in Greece, including the financial burden that comes with it, and the fact that you don't have any guarantee that your application will receive a positive result. It is an equally likely possibility that you might instead be forced to join the Army if your application is rejected.

My way of deciding was really to weigh the pros and cons for each. I was very rational and took a rational approach to this. And then I took an irrational approach to this - by flipping a coin! Do you know how they say when you flip a coin, there's also this split moment when the coin is in the air, where you feel what the right answer for you is? I don't know if I felt that, but when it landed, I certainly said I should do the alternative service. I was like, yes, that sounds right! Even if it means 12 months just for the service, and probably some extra six months of not being able to really do what I want to do.

LIMITED AWARENESS OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN GREECE

I didn't get support from my close social circle at the time. But at the same time, we have to understand how very little awareness there is about the alternative service and conscientious objectors in Greece. And really, what you're doing as a man in your 20s, when you say to people, "I'm going to follow this path", you're also taking the role of an educator. Because you're probably the person who knows the subject best in your circle. And so, you need to explain your decision to your family - explain to them what this is about. You have to explain to your friends what you're trying to do. You also have to be aware of the risks. As I said, you might end up being conscripted by force. And you have to explain this to your family and friends. And, they often find this part hard to swallow, so they will inevitably -at least some of them- guide you to "do you really want to do this?" "Isn't there an easier way, like just joining the army?" or "just doing something else", or "just postponing this thing?" And you have to stand up for your beliefs at that point and really explain to them that "no, I have really thought this through, I am aware of the risks, and I'm going to do this."



And after you do it, they will turn around. It would truly be a much more supportive environment, a much easier process if there were awareness of conscientious objection in society. But it's in our hands because the state does not want awareness.

APPLYING FOR ALTERNATIVE SERVICE

Currently, we have some online resources that explain the process, and they have been written by conscientious objectors and with legal references. I have a small interest in law, and it felt better for me to just go to the original source and read the law, see what it says about the procedure and understand the risks. But having the online resources written by conscious objectors was definitely the most valuable. And then the Association of Greek COs had some leaflets that were less about the procedure itself, but more about offering examples. We have some leaflets from some years ago with, for example, reasons why previous conscientious objectors followed this process, what reasons they invoked, and why they refused to be part of the army. And it is equally helpful to see that. Because it just puts you at ease to learn that these people have done it before.

It was empowering to read the stories of previous conscientious objectors. When I was preparing to write my application to the state to explain why I'm refusing to join the army, I was inspired by historical examples – for example, by people who, during World War I, were standing for demilitarisation. Or, for example, people managed to have some wins in the form of treaties that banned certain types of weapons. These stories are about actual people who did actual things in the past. And that is the most impactful form of validation of what we do today.

WHY REFUSE TO SERVE IN THE ARMY?

I'd like to flip the question -and that is something I wrote in the application as well- and ask "why do we take it for granted that a young man should serve in the army?" Why is this a normalised thing in our societies? Why do conscientious objectors who refuse to do that need to explain themselves?

We pretend like everyone else who serves in the military is so philosophically and politically aware of their decision to serve, and the rest of us who refuse to serve are the ones who need to explain ourselves? No, this is not how it works. There is a mandatory conscription imposed by the state, and hardly any young man is actually motivated to do this. Most of them are serving in the army because they are forced to. That is what conscription is.

> "Transformative pacifism takes a look at the world and asks us to think about what our ambition is. What is the world we want to build? How do we want to exist in this world? And how do we get there?"

In my application, I had to go back to how I was raised and explain that people resist the armies because they have not been taught to think like this growing up. In school, I did not learn to hate the other people in other countries. I was not taught the reasons why I could kill them. I was not taught to help in manufacturing weapons. I was not taught all that. I was taught to collaborate with people to learn from their different experiences, their different

cultures; I was taught to resolve conflicts. So, everything that leads up to conscription goes against this whole spirit. That was my primary point, really, when explaining my motivation in my application. It was not like I had spent a lot of time thinking about pacifism and activism, or the more philosophical and moral grounds of my conscientious objection. It was more of a natural fact of life growing up in environments that are peaceful and that nurture connection and help each other.

TRANSFORMATIVE PACIFISM

Also, the idea of 'transformative pacifism' played a role in my conscientious objection. Transformative pacifism takes a look at the world and asks us to think about what our ambition is. What is the world we want to build? How do we want to exist in this world? And how do we get there?

It is very absurd to think that the answer to these questions lies in a system of countries, each of which has a weaponised system ready for defence. In fact, it's just the only thing that enables worse things to happen. Especially considering weapons becoming stronger and stronger, and more powerful, and more dangerous, and more disastrous, the demilitarisation is not just an optional thing; it's a moral duty. It's the same as reducing carbon emissions, but even more apt than that, it's as clear as day! And I think it's helpful to approach it within a practical framework rather than something like "I have a higher moral ground than you as a conscientious objector." Practical pacifism is appealing to everyone, and it's more about thinking as a collective on how to end wars and reach a stable peace. Average people are actually very open to the idea of demilitarisation, but their only concern is whether everyone will do it and how we can make sure of that. It's less about this is not the right thing to do, but more about a pessimism about it.

A TURKISH SPY?

I did not receive negative stigma from my environment in this process. Negative stigma for conscientious objectors in Greece comes mostly from political parties that have a nationalistic ideology. So any negative stigma is more in the public discourse rather than in everyday life. For me, it was the case as well. The only negative stigma I've experienced has been when I give interviews and when they get published. There are people who will comment online about how I'm not a patriot, that I'm a traitor and a Turkish spy or similar. I don't pay attention to that kind of reaction. Especially because they're online, and I generally don't think online commenting is worthy of paying attention to. Also, I think that with some of those people writing negative comments, we as conscientious objectors would still be able to sit down and have a discussion about what Greece's role is in the military system and war, really. I don't think there are no grounds for agreement, unless we're speaking about really fascist people and militaristic ideologues.

PUNITIVE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE IN GREECE

When I was performing my alternative service, I was able to keep my job and work remotely due to the nature of my job. So, I still had the income although I was working part-time instead of full-time. But that was enough for

sustenance. However, that is not the norm, and that is not how it should be. Even though you shouldn't need to work extra hours just to make ends meet.

There are several punitive aspects of the alternative system in Greece, and the financial one is among the most unappealing.

When performing alternative service, you are not able to serve in your region of residence. Also, most of the placements do not provide housing or food. In most cases, we're speaking about someone who will have to leave their region of residence and rent a place. The compensation provided is €223. When I served, that was just the amount of rent that I had to pay. So, I had zero money to feed myself, for any medical expenses, for transportation-related expenses to go back to see my family. Frankly, I don't know how other people do it. I think considering how the system works, it requires a privileged person to be able to do it. But there have been people who, out of sheer commitment to their beliefs, went this route and probably had to work a second job as well. Or maybe they weren't able to meet their basic needs.

So for me, being able to work remotely saved me. I was working full-time for my alternative service, but was also doing a part-time additional job. And I was lucky enough to be placed in a less expensive city or town.

BEFORE AND AFTER ALTERNATIVE SERVICE

I was placed in Lesbos - a place heavily connected to the refugee context. With the hours of service and my part-time job hours, I still had some free time to spare. And I volunteered with an NGO working in the refugee context. I think in my head, probably my subconscious motivation was that this was actually what I would have liked to do instead of just being an I.T. person in the municipality. And I met amazing people through this work, including my current partner. It was a lovely experience to live on that island despite all the ongoing conflicts between locals and refugees, and NGO workers that are coming from abroad... It was a melting pot of sometimes dangerous temperatures. But just seeing some refugees that have lived there and have managed to integrate and open up their own shops, like Syrian falafel, it has just been a privilege to witness that. I'm very grateful for this experience, for living on the island, and for meeting the locals. The majority of them are really welcoming and open-minded and just very kind humans.

And I think the biggest impact in terms of my politics has been just having no patience for realpolitik, especially coming from parties that consider themselves progressive while justifying increased defence spending and militarised responses to the migration crisis or supporting genocides or supporting illegal interventions... My experience has been an eye-opening one for me, for sure. Otherwise, I might have just

turned a blind eye and not been opinionated about this.

LET'S TALK ABOUT HOPE

I'm stealing a quote from somebody, I can't remember who, but they said: "Hope is really a duty." And I'm seeing it all around that sometimes the way we react to what is happening in the world, especially the way we consume the news, is very passive and pessimistic. I mean, it makes sense to be pessimistic, right? I can totally understand it, but at the same time, we're not observers, and if we accept our fate as observers, that's the biggest gift we can give to the reactionary powers.

So, hope is a duty, and it takes work; it means work. It is also a vehicle that, if you have hope and if you put in the work, you will probably bump into other people who will also have hope. I will be putting in the work, and it is through collective action that we have any hope for change. So we always need to keep this little light, this little flame at the end of the tunnel and walk towards it, and avoid the temptation to be observers.

Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Greece

The right to conscientious objection to military service in Greece was recognised in 1997. The country is known for serious violations of this right, as the alternative service provided is punitive, due to the length and conditions, and not under civilian control. Conscientious objectors experience many hardships related to the economic, social, family, and cultural aspects of their lives because of their decision to object. For instance, they have to perform their alternative service in a region other than the one where they reside, receive a lower salary, and face an increased cost of living during their alternative service.

Mohammed & Abel

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Mohammed: I left Eritrea when I was 15 years old. I like playing football. I am the oldest of three brothers and two sisters. My 17-year-old brother lives in Sudan, another is in Saudi Arabia, and the younger ones are 12, 8, and 6. My brother is in 10th grade, and when he finishes 12th grade, he must join a military school. My sisters are still in school. My family used to farm, but the government made us stop. We also ran a cafe. I have always wanted to start a business to help my family and make them happy.

Abel: I left Eritrea when I was 28 years old. I have two sisters and a brother, aged 4, 8, and 10. Like Mohammed, I enjoy playing football in my free time.

LIVING IN ERITREA

Mohammed: Life in Eritrea was very difficult. People are too scared to talk about what is really happening or say anything negative. There is no internet or social media. For example, if you try to send a message from a cafe, it can take two hours, and the government watches everything. If you travel alone after midnight, the police might catch you. You need a card to travel between towns, and sometimes the military patrols the cities.

MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN ERITREA

Mohammed: In Eritrea, the military visits schools as students turn 15, or sooner if they appear older. Those seen as troublemakers, or caught violating rules like drinking or going out late, may be forced into conscription. Refusing military service leads to prison, where the risk of death is high.

If you leave, the military can come to your home and send your family to prison. I don't know how long. It could be 4, 10, or even 15 years. There is no set time for punishments.

In 12th grade, students go to Sawa Military Academy. If you have good grades, you might get a job in military administration or become a doctor.

LEAVING ERITREA ACROSS BORDERS AND VIOLENCE

Mohammed: I decided to escape to Sudan because I thought it would be safer than staying in Eritrea. My journey was long and dangerous: I walked for five days between cities, travelling at night and hiding during the day. The military guards the borders. If they catch you, they

might shoot you or send you to prison in Eritrea, where you get no food.

I went to Sudan, where I had some friends. Life was hard, and I had to work a lot. However, due to difficult conditions, I then went to Libya, where things were much worse. The smugglers locked us in a warehouse with no showers and demanded we pay EUR 5,000 to be released. In the warehouse, we only got food and water once a day, and the girls were raped every night.

From there, we went to Tripoli and lived in a rented house, waiting for 6 or 7 months to get registered. Every night, we worried our house would be raided, our belongings stolen, and the girls would be raped again. A smuggler finally moved us to prepare for the sea crossing, which meant three more months without enough food or water. When we finally got on a boat, the Libyan government captured us and sent us to prison. Food was a luxury, and my skin was covered in rashes. In prison, they beat us and demanded more money.
From there, I travelled for days, from Sicily to Milano, crossing cold mountains. Some people died from the cold. In Nice, people gave me money so I could buy what I needed and keep moving. It took two days to reach the country where I am currently staying.

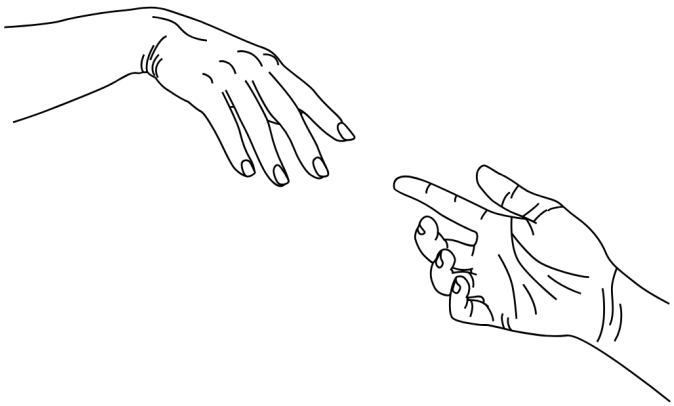
When I arrived in my new country, it was very hard to find a place to live. Many people had to sleep on the street.

Abel: I escaped from Eritrea to Sudan, then from Sudan to Libya. Libya was full of war actions, especially at night. I stayed there for two years, but it was never safe. There were no refugee camps. People could rob us at any time. Women were raped whenever soldiers wanted. On the Sudan-Libya border, armed groups would hold people for ransom. I took a boat to Lampedusa, Italy, and from there to Sicily, Naples, and Turin. I travelled for three days without tickets. I walked seven hours to cross the French border. Volunteers gave us clothing and saved our lives. It was much colder than in Italy. Then I arrived in the country where I am currently staying. My friend told me about a safe house and helped me get there. Now I am happy and safe.

RELOCATING IN A SAFER PLACE

Mohammed: I miss my family deeply. They are unhappy, and I have not seen or spoken to them for eight years. Out of fear of government surveillance, I avoid calling - there is no WhatsApp in Eritrea. Conversations lasting more than 10 minutes attract attention, as internet costs are enormous for people there. My uncle twice attempted escape, which led to six years in prison, and he is now conscripted into the military.

Abel: I have found a temporary residence where I feel safe. This country offers asylum to Eritreans, as it is hard to send us back because we have no documents. I am studying the local



language, but I often lack funds for transport to my classes.

THINKING "SMALL" ABOUT THE FUTURE

Mohammed: There is nothing for my family to be happy about. Nothing is changing.
I want my family to be happy and have freedom. In Eritrea, you cannot have freedom, even to travel between cities. If I go back, I could be sent to prison or die.

Yet I hold onto a dream - to be free and establish a home here.

It was hard to come here by boat. People died on the journey. I have many painful memories and trauma from the past. I want to be able to relax. Before, I could not sleep, but now I can. I want to learn new skills, find a job, and get married. I hope to make friends and enjoy being with people. As a child, I had big dreams, but now I think small.

Abel: I feel the same way.

This interview was arranged by **Diwan House** in Woluwe Saint Lambert, which helps unhoused asylum seekers like Mohammed and Abel in Belgium.

Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Eritrea

Eritrea does not recognise the right to conscientious objection to military service.

In the country, there is a system of indefinite National Service, for men and women, which presents practices that in many cases amount to forced labour.

Reports show forced recruitment, police raids called giffas, and the government's punishment of the families of deserters.

The number of Eritrean refugees seeking protection abroad is very high, and often some of them are refouled back to Eritrea, in blatant breach of international human rights standards, which entitle conscientious objectors to military service to asylum if their life is at risk in their country of origin.

“ It was hard to come here by boat. People died on the journey. I have many painful memories and trauma from the past. I want to be able to relax. Before, I could not sleep, but now I can. I want to learn new skills, find a job, and get married. I hope to make friends and enjoy being with people. As a child, I had big dreams, but now I think small. ”

Mayis

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

My name is Mayis, and I am 45 years old. I am from the western part of Türkiye, from Çanakkale, in the Aegean coastal region. I was raised by parents involved in the forest department, mostly in a small town close to the forest. I spent my childhood in nature, so that shaped a lot of my identity. I always preferred to be close to nature.

I studied sociology at the Aegean University, but I quit my studies in my second year because of my political activity. I joined political activities in the anarchist circles and anti-militarist milieus.

I moved to Istanbul for a while. Istanbul was the place to go for the job, but I realised I could not stay long there. And so I moved in and out of Istanbul for a few years: for a while I was in Istanbul, and then I was out in the countryside. Then, I decided I do not want to live in the city anymore. So, almost fifteen years ago, I moved out of the city. And since then, I have been living in the countryside most of my life.

I am a translator by profession. I care for the garden, and I go for walks in the forest. I collect edible plants and mushrooms. I studied permaculture and agroecology. I took courses and also participated in some gatherings, one in India too. I try to grow organically and naturally. Now, I am married, and I cultivate together with my wife. We have been growing, but first we grew for ourselves, for our sustenance, and then we also started doing it on a small commercial scale. We try to be gentle with nature in the garden and try to understand its principles and processes, and to do everything as close to it as possible - how nature would do it.

Other than that, I am mostly on my computer. Thanks to my job, I have the freedom of space, and so I can live wherever I want. I work on the computer as a freelancer, then do the gardening stuff or walk in the forest. I work with translations and lately, in the last two to three years, because work has changed a lot and everything is moving in the direction of AI, I also started working with AI, annotating and training some AI models. I am doing it because now it is hard to find translation jobs after AI use started to spread.

CHOOSING POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND NATURE

To be honest, I never wanted to go to university in the first place. I became an anarchist very early. My parents are also coming from political activism. So, I was growing up in political circles from a young age. And at 15, I realised that I do not identify as a communist or a socialist, but rather I call myself an anarchist. And then I became familiar with some anarchist milieus, and I decided that going to the university, to the college, did not make much sense to me. I already made up my mind that I do not want to live in a society like a normal person, part of a clog and work and work. So, I thought I wanted to live. I knew that I wanted to live like I am living right now. So I decided not to go to the university, but this was a reason for tension with my family, especially with my father. In whatever I did, he was supporting my choices,

but he wanted me to go to the university. So, mostly for their sake, I said, " Okay, I will go.

I used to identify as an anarchist, but as I grew up in a small town, I was the only one, or maybe just two or three friends, with similar thoughts. But when I was in the city, studying at the university, I met lots of other anarchists and began to get involved in activism, direct actions, and political campaigns. I realised there were a lot of people like me. And in the second year, I said I do not want to continue with school, and what I want to do is to organise my life according to my beliefs and my ethical principles. So, I decided to quit school.

DECIDING TO BECOME A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR TO MILITARY SERVICE

I have been involved in an anti-militarist circle for a long while. In 1999, I met the first anti-militarist activist, and back then, I was just 18, and I knew I did not want to go to the military. I had already made up my mind that I would never go to the Army. I did not want to confront the state on this issue. At that time, I thought I had other struggles and political engagements, and I did not want to take this into my focus right then. I was joining campaigns and protests, and I was supporting other conscientious objectors during their trials. Everyone was asking me when I was going to declare my objection. I did answer no, I will not declare my objection, and that when the state comes to me and takes me, I will declare it. I would not declare it prior to that. It. I just preferred to evade it and go with the flow as long as I could. That was my line. Then, around 2007, there was tension between the ruling AKP government and the older generation, more militaristic. I was supporting neither of them, of course, but I was seeing a lot of militarisation in daily life; everywhere it was full of nationalist symbols and flags and discourses. Then, I thought, okay, this is now a time to declare my objection, my stance and my views about this situation because it has now become part of the whole political situation. It was not just about my own convictions; I thought that if I made a conscientious objection declaration now, it could make a small change in society.

So, in 2008, I decided to declare my conscientious objection, and I did it.

GETTING SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

" It was not just about my own convictions; I thought that if I made a conscientious objection declaration now, it could make a small change in society. "

Because of my decisions and the choices I made and the way I live my life, I am mostly in a protected environment, somehow. I do not get to see much. If I want to, I can communicate with other people from other walks of life, but it is not necessary for me. Most of the time I get into communication with people whom I prefer to. I lived in a supportive environment: many of my friends, and also the people from the political circles from which I am coming, or with whom I shared some thoughts and some actions, were mostly supportive. When I told my family, who also come from political circles, they supported my decision.

Actually, I was a little bit afraid that my parents would be worried. I was sure they would have been supportive, but also that they would have been worried because it is not easy to be a conscientious objector in Türkiye. It is a long-term struggle. So, I thought that they would somehow try to convince me to do paid military service or something similar. So, at the beginning, I did not tell them. I just made the declaration, and I did not tell them.

But then, of course, they learned about it a few days later, and they told me that I should have informed them, and they would have supported me in any possible way.

It is still like this, with my ongoing struggle. I have been an objector for many years now. And my family, and even my friends, sometimes tell me that they understand that it is not an easy thing to do and that maybe I want to reconsider it again. They tell me that if I do not have money, they can support me, and so I can do the paid military service. They do not try to convince me. I appreciate that they are offering me an option in case I feel overwhelmed or exhausted. And I do appreciate it.

PERSECUTION OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS IN TÜRKIYE

At the time I declared my conscientious objection, things were different. The generation before me faced really hard conditions. In Türkiye, military service is compulsory and back in the days, there was no option for you not to go to the military; they would forcibly take you and put the uniform on you, shave your head, and you were in the army. When it was time, they would take you, and then you would have to declare your objection within the military. Then, they would punish you with disciplinary sentences and put you in military prison and military courts. It was not easy. It was tough. I was supporting those friends back then, and it was just like that. My family and friends knew that, but around the time I made my declaration, maybe two or three months later, Türkiye was trying to be more in line with EU regulations. Now it has changed course from the EU.

In 2008 and 2009, the country was becoming more pro EU and they were changing regulations and it was passed the regulation that civilians could not be taken to the army by force and could not be put into military courts. This changed a lot of things and I had to explain it to my family and worried friends. At least they could not forcibly take me, or, at least, would not put me in the military court.

And it has been like this for a long while: from 2008/2009 till 2015, they were not putting charges on us. It was easy.

In 2014/2015, things started to change again. They first began to send us some monetary fines for not showing up in the military, and then, they started the criminal courts. Now the situation is like this: there are a lot of checkpoints in Türkiye, everywhere in the streets, and you have to go through those checkpoints and at the checkpoints, they see that you have not done your military service. Then, they have to give you a piece of paper that you sign and declare that you will go to the closest military station within fifteen days. If you do not show up, they will start a criminal case against you.

So, as conscientious objectors, we either do not sign this document or we say that we are conscientious objectors and write it down on the paper that we will not show up in the military centre and sign it. And of course, with each paper we sign or do not sign, a new criminal case is opened. I have gone through these openings of criminal cases more than a dozen times, till now. In the beginning, it is like you have a criminal case opened, and the court gives you a monetary fine, and then they give you probation. I did pass through all of that.

Now, they are giving actual prison sentences; they introduced a new legislation just last year. Before that, for any prison sentence below two years, you would not go to prison; but now, for every prison sentence,, you will go to prison for at least two or three days, a week, or a month. In my last sentence, I had to go to prison for three days, and they put me on probation for two and a half months. I had to show up at the police station to sign a paper, and they also made me do something like unpaid civil service, but not as an alternative to military service, because of objections. It was a substitute for an imprisonment sentence. So, I had to go to the forestry department and work for them for seventeen days. This also opened a new horizon for me. Now, I am thinking that maybe I can use it as a starting point for a campaign

for civil service: if we can do this for the imprisonment sentence, we can do it for the military service as well. My work in the forestry department ended last week, and I made my last two signatures at the police station three days ago, on March 31st. Now I am free.

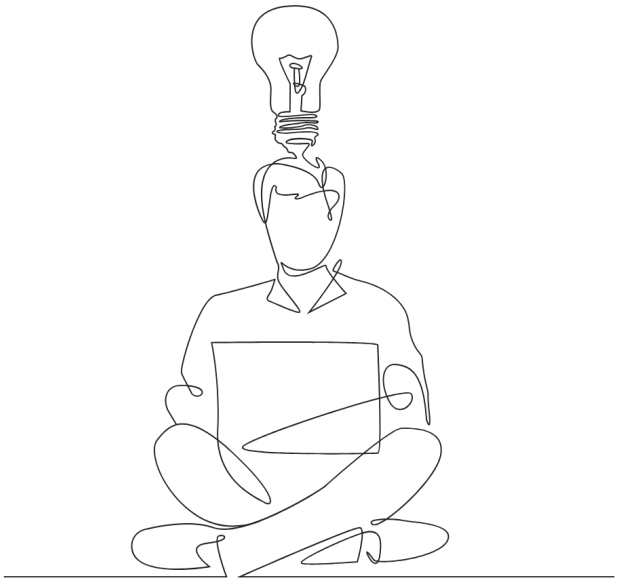
WHAT IS GIVING ME STRENGTH

I am surrounded by loved ones; I am surrounded by people who support me and understand me and my decisions that are based on ethical grounds, ethical principles. The most important thing for me is being understood by the people who surround me. At the personal level, for more than twenty-five years now, I have been practising some kind of mindfulness and other practices like Zen meditation. It helps me balance my inner thoughts and emotions, and how I react to things in life. I think that this is the thing that supports me. And I can also count on nature. Most of the time, when you are in the city, at least for me, when I was living in the city, there is more pressure coming from all sides. You are surrounded by too many attractions, too many distractions, and your mind gets easily cloudy. But, when you prefer to live close to nature, even if your mind is not in the right place, then you can just go out, take a walk and get out of your mind; you get out of your small personal experience and you get connected to the sounds of birds or you see a plant and you wonder if it is edible or if you see a flower, you wonder what kind of flower is. That is also helping, I guess.

WHAT SOMEONE COULD LEARN FROM MY STORY

The first thing is understanding yourself. Understanding how you react to the world, how you react to your surroundings and even to your own emotions, and thoughts rising up and going down. Trying to understand yourself is the key to every kind of action. Whenever a new person approaches me and says that they are considering conscientious objection, or some other thing like an anarchist action, I explain that there are consequences and there will be consequences. There will be things you are not expecting, and if you want to go through them, first of all, you need to be balanced in yourself, understand yourself, and make sure that this is not coming from a reactionary thing, but rather it is based on your principles, in understanding yourself.

If anybody who reads my experience or reads what I am going through, and see what they are going through too and it sparks something in them to think about themselves -It does not have to be conscientious objection or anything like, or it can be something totally different- and if it is about understanding your true self and acting according to your ethical principles and your true heart, then, it will have been worth, I believe.



A MESSAGE TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS

I would like to say to the younger generation, including also my generation, that we need to get off the screens and go out into the streets. That is the most important thing. There are a lot of people who are against those wars and those injustices. But, mostly, what we do is to get into social media and make some posts about it and feel good about it and then go on with our lives. We forgot about organising and finding the like-minded ones in real life, out in the streets. It does not have to be a demonstration. When I say go out in the street, it can be good to demonstrate, but it is not only about demonstration, it is about getting organised, finding people and getting your voice heard by other people; making some kind of action, not just putting it on social media and forgetting. This is the single most important thing I believe.

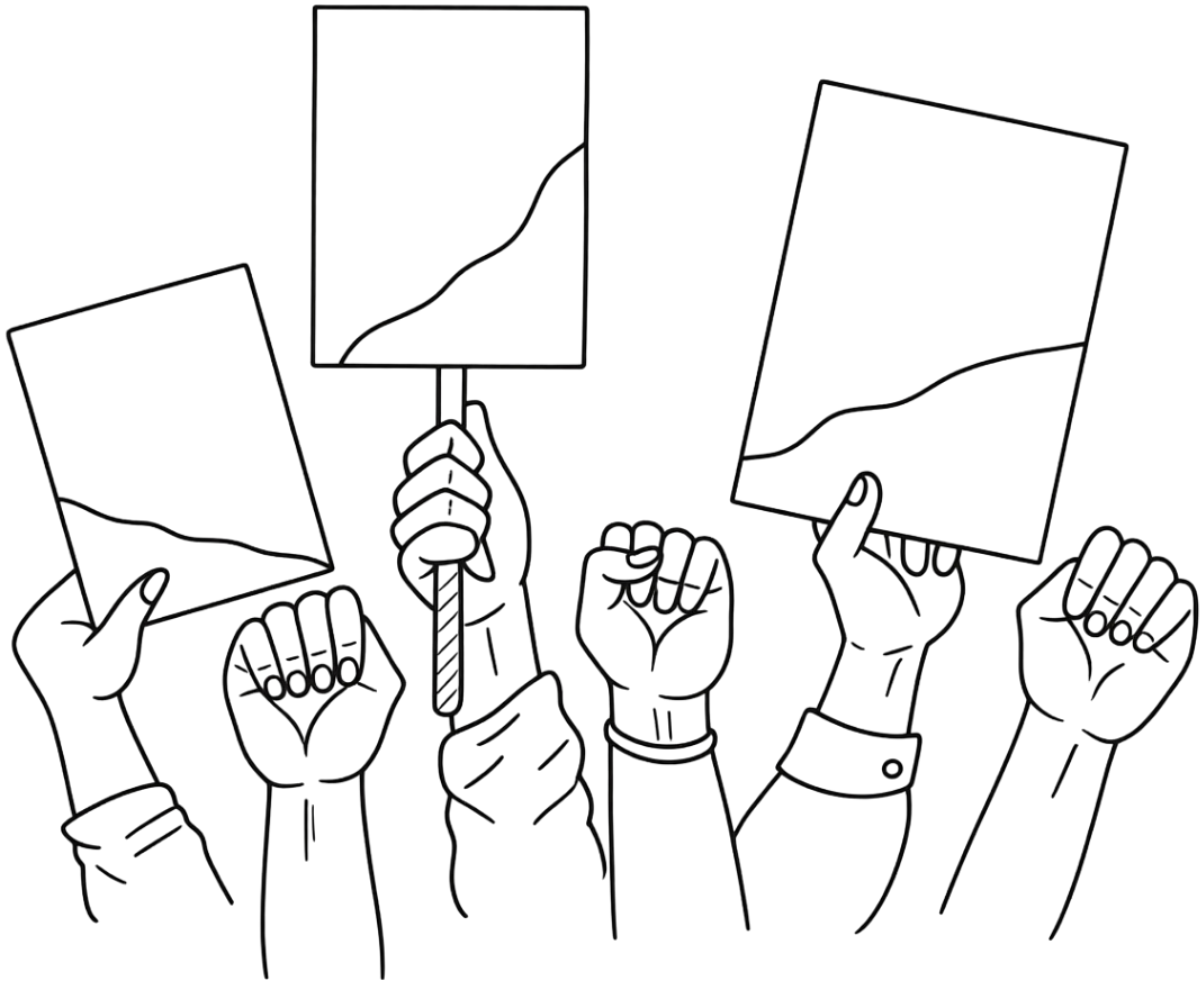
Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Türkiye

Türkiye is the only member of the Council of Europe that has not recognised the right to conscientious objection to military service. Military service is compulsory for all men aged 20 to 41, but for those who do not fulfil their obligation before age 41, it continues until they do.

Conscientious objectors are considered liable to compulsory military service and treated as criminals. Those who object to military service face repeated criminal charges and severe restrictions on their civil, economic, social, and political rights.

The European Court of Human Rights stated that these vicious circles of violations amount to a ‘situation of civil death’ (Case Ulke v. Türkiye).

“ I would like to say to the younger generation, including also my generation, that we need to get off the screens and go out into the streets. That is the most important thing. ”



Ayana

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I'm Ayana. I am nineteen years old and from Israel. I live in the centre of Israel, near Tel Aviv. I am part of a network called Mesarvot, which helps young Israeli people who want to refuse to be enlisted in the army, whether publicly or not publicly. Mesarvot gives them the support they need regarding the refusal process. I refused last summer, and I'm a conscientious objector myself.
About two months after I got out of the military jail, I started my civil service. I'm working in a school, in a small classroom for children with difficulties, difficulties in both studies and emotional difficulties. It's a small classroom of nine students. In Israel, it's normally about forty students in one classroom. So my classroom is much smaller than the normal size, and I'm there with a teacher to help her. So, I'm kind of a teaching assistant.

GETTING POLITICALLY AWARE

It started some years back. My parents have always talked about the actions of the Israeli army, and they have always criticised those actions. So, I grew into having the opportunity to observe the actions of the Israeli army more objectively. I was privileged to have this opportunity and to see it from a young age because in Israel, among most of the Israeli society, it is not a discussed issue at all. You don't talk about whether the IDF is moral or not. It is a 'fact' that it is moral. Even in schools -every child in Israel knows that-, people are always saying that the IDF is the most moral army in the world. You always hear it. So, there is no thought that it might be something else. So, I grew up in this sort of context, and I didn't have any political awareness until the age of eleven. At the age of eleven, I started to be politically aware. The way I got politically aware was very ironic. I got a project in school in the fifth grade. It was

a project about Jerusalem. The teacher asked every student to study three places in Jerusalem and then make a presentation in the class. The project was given - I think - a bit before Jerusalem Day, a day in Israel which celebrates the Israeli army's conquering East Jerusalem to 'unite' the two parts of the city. The western part was already in Israeli territory, and then the union made a whole and 'sacred' Jerusalem. This is how it is perceived in Israel and how it is taught in Israeli schools. Of course, today I know that it was not the great union of Jerusalem, but it was the occupation of East Jerusalem. I know it now, but I didn't know it then. It is a silenced issue in Israel. They don't talk about what is being done to the other side at all, the immoral side of the Israeli army and the immoral side of the great Israel...

For the school project, my mother suggested that I read about East Jerusalem through the website of B'Tselem, which is an Israeli organisation working to reveal injustice being made in the occupied territories. I read about it, and I understood what I didn't know for years - I understood it for the first time in my life. I saw what was being done to Palestinians in Jerusalem - what has been ongoing until today. Those were the things that I hadn't heard of before; things that I hadn't known were happening. I didn't know that there were people called Palestinians in Jerusalem whose human rights were being denied; who did not get the right to be citizens in Israel, although Israel was occupying East Jerusalem illegally against international law. So, I saw it, and I understood what was happening there. That was the moment I became politically aware, and since then, it has been growing on me more and more.

DECIDING TO REFUSE MILITARY SERVICE

For it has grown on me for years, I was conscientiously unable to be enlisted in an army which occupies the West Bank, which denies the most basic human rights of the people living there, and which controls any aspect of the lives of Palestinians. I knew that it was not possible for me to be part of this army, and refusing was the right thing to do.
I had known for some years that I was not going to be a part of the army, but until the age of sixteen, I did not think about a public refusal. I thought that I would get a release from the army through the 'mental health' path. There are some ways in Israel to get out of the army. If you say that you are religious as a girl, you can get a religious release, and then you would be out of the army. For boys, it's a little bit more complicated, and it is a controversial issue today in Israel. There is also the option of conscientious objection, which Israel is obliged to offer according to international law. However, it's very, very hard to get a release through conscientious objection. They basically want to hear that you are a pacifist in general terms, but they do not want to hear specific things. If they hear that you say West Bank, occupation, Gaza, genocide, and so on, they automatically claim that you're not a conscientious objector but a 'political' objector. They claim that these concerns are political and specific, and they wouldn't stop you from being part of the army. They claim that the army is not political, and so those 'political' issues are your problem, and that you will get over it and be part of the army.

REFUSING PUBLICLY

When I was sixteen, I saw a story on TV about three Israeli refusers. It was on a mainstream TV channel, and refusers were explaining why they refused. All of them were from Mesarvot. I knew there were people who refused, but I had never seen refusers explain their actions, especially on a mainstream TV channel. I wasn't thinking of doing it myself yet at that time, but I decided to do it a few months later. I thought of those refusers, and I thought about why they would publicly refuse and sit in jail for what they think, while I would get out of it conveniently. I thought that I should do what they did; if they decided to pay such a price, I should be part of this public and important struggle, and be willing to pay a price as well. Seeing these refusers on TV helped me to make a decision to refuse publicly.

But it was also a casual conversation with a friend of mine at school that helped me make my decision. I remember telling her about my plans to avoid being enlisted through the

mental health path - basically lying to the army about mental health-related problems and getting a release through that. I told my friend why I was doing it, and what my opinions were. And then she said, "If these are your opinions, why don't you just say it? Why would you lie? Why would you lie about it? Say it to the army and go to jail." She said it in such a way that it was so clear, and it really made me think. It was the first time I thought about it. I said, "Wow, she's right! Why would I lie about it? Why should I hide my opinions? I should scream my opinions and say it as loud as possible for people to hear and to understand why I'm refusing." I should make my voice heard in order for people to understand what is being done to Palestinians. My voice could echo the Palestinians' voice, which is not heard in Israeli society. As a member of Israeli society, I thought I must echo their voices among the Israeli people.

This conversation with my friend made me think. And then I remembered those refusers on TV, and I decided that this was what I should do. It was about half a year before October seventh. And since the war started, every day passing made me understand that this was the right thing to do. There is no other act that I could do. And it was everything I could possibly do to individually try to stop the horrors in Gaza, and to individually make the Israeli people understand what is being done in their name, what crimes are committed in their name; and to call them and make them understand what basic moral laws are being broken under their noses. They don't understand it. They don't see it at all. So, I knew that a public refusal was the only thing I could do to maybe make them see it, and to wake them up to reality. This was my process for deciding to publicly refuse.

PROTESTING, REFUSING AND GETTING IMPRISONED

Two months before my enlistment day, I contacted Mesarvot, and I became part of them. They helped me a lot with everything related to my refusal. How it works is that, on the enlistment day, you enter the military reception base and declare your refusal. So, my enlistment day, which was July 31st, 2025, was also the day I refused publicly. I refused with another conscientious objector, Yuval Peleg, who later spent five months in military prison. I spent 30 days in total in military prison.

We were imprisoned right after our refusal, and July 31st was the first day in jail for both of us. Mesarvot organised a demonstration outside the military base on the day. I remember some people around us getting quite violent. Those were the people who came to escort their children being enlisted on the day. Some got really mad at us and started to curse us. When I was reading my declaration on the microphone, they shouted terrible things to silence me. Sometimes they tried to physically attack people in the demonstration. But somehow everyone got out of it peacefully. Soldiers in the military base knew that there were refusers that day because it's rare that there are people who come to refuse. And it's even more rare that there are people outside protesting.

After that, I got into the reception base. At the very first step, all conscripts are allowed to be there with their families or friends. They didn't let my parents be with me, even though they should have. And from that point on, you learn to understand that the military system is random. They do whatever they want when they want, whether it's legal or illegal, whether these are the rules or not.

Then I got on a bus, which took us to the place where they gather new conscripts. I told the soldier who got me there that I am refusing and not being enlisted. From there, they passed me from one soldier to another and made me wait for some hours. Then I was called for a military trial, following which I was sentenced and sent to the military prison to spend a month there. That month was difficult for me. I felt the gender difference most in prison. There was a great difference in how they were treating boys and girls. There were some rules that only girls were made to follow. For example, while male prisoners were allowed to sleep during the day in their cells, female prisoners were not even allowed to lie down on their beds during the day. We were only allowed to sit on the

bed in our cells. There were whole days that we could not lie down for a second. And if we were caught lying down or sleeping, we could be punished for that. Another example is that the treatment from the commanders was very different for male and female prisoners. For male prisoners, their commanders were talking to them almost like friends. OK, not all the time, but sometimes, they could be very friendly with them. For women prisoners, it was not like that at all. The commanders were very hard on us. We could be punished for saying something not appropriate for their thinking, for not respecting the commanders. This continued like that until I got released.

THINGS I LEARNED

Since I got out of jail, I started to be more and more active within Mesarvot - participating in demonstrations and actions. I was not really political before. I only became part of Mesarvot two months before my refusal, and my political involvement has grown since then – particularly after I got out of jail.

Also, there is something that has grown on me under the impact of being in jail. I felt that I became more compassionate towards prisoners generally. I now feel empathy for them as I know what they are going through. Of course, I was imprisoned for only a month, not decades, but this experience taught me to be more empathetic to prisoners generally.

And I think this whole experience made me understand better what Palestinians living in the West Bank under a military regime went through for decades. Of course, I cannot really understand what they are going through and their suffering, but I feel that I can empathise better with them now as I have a clue of what it is to live under a military system.

SPEAKING AGAINST THE MILITARY IN ISRAEL

It's difficult here to speak against the military. Even saying things raising questions about the morality of the army is considered almost like a betrayal, because the army is almost sacred in Israel. It is considered to be the heart of society, the thing that brings the whole society together. If you try to say something against the army's actions, you are automatically considered to be a traitor who tries to ruin the country from the inside. And so, it's hard to be an activist or a refuser in here. I personally did not encounter a negative stigma, but I know I will encounter it at some point. I know that there are many places and moments in life where if I say that I refused to be enlisted, people will look at me very badly and will see me as a traitor, and will not want to be near me. But I can say that I haven't encountered a negative stigma outside of jail yet. In jail, I did, but outside, I haven't really encountered it because I know who I can talk to about my refusal and to whom I cannot tell about it. You can recognise somebody who will understand you or who might not agree with you, but can still bear it

> "Women refusers and antimilitarist activists offer a feminism according to which women should act in line with their conscience rather than satisfying an image whose terms are determined by men and male perception."

without hating you. And then there are people so hateful that you cannot tell because there is no point in telling them. They will only shout at me or curse me. So, I do not even try with some people.

REFUSING MILITARY SERVICE AS A WOMAN IN ISRAEL

I think that there is an issue in Israel with the idea of women in the army. The whole perception of feminism in Israel is really the perception of feminism as in 'women can be in the army – and even in combat roles'. In schools, every time they talk about feminism, they give the example of Alice Miller, who successfully sued the military for the right to enlist in the air force flight academy. Ultimately her case opened combat roles for women in the Israeli military. It is really the first thing that people think of when they think about feminism. And I think that anti-militarist activism of women and women refusers put a different perception of feminism in Israel. They challenge the perception of feminism in Israel according to which a woman can also be a fighter and can kill people without mercy. I think that women's anti-militarist activism puts in the centre a feminism that does not think about how men will see us. It does not put male perception in the centre of our decision. I mean it challenges a perception of feminism which desperately tries to prove that women can own the military world – that has traditionally been controlled by men. So, women refusers and antimilitarist activists offers a feminism according to which women should act in line with their conscience rather than satisfying an image whose terms are determined by men and male perception.

Also, I think that female objectors remind us that it is not legitimate to be part of the military system in any way. Some in Israel think that it is not right to serve in the occupied territories, or it's immoral to perform in combat roles, but otherwise it is OK to be part of the military, such as serving as an I.T. person or being a driver, etc. And I think that this sort of non-combat roles are the ones mostly occupied by women - most of the women do not serve in combat roles. So, I think that when women refuse to be part of the military, they speak to society, saying that there is a moral problem with serving in any part of this system. Committing crimes in combat roles is clearly immoral, but it's also immoral to be part of the system that gives legitimation to these crimes. By being part of the system, one says 'I agree to this action'. Even though there are soldiers who think that the occupation should not exist, if they agree to be enlisted, they are giving legitimacy to the occupation, even if they might not want to. So I think that women who decide to object to the military service also make the point of saying 'no' to being any little part of this system.

> "My ideal is a country without Jewish superiority; a country for all its citizens; a country where everyone is equal to one another."

WHAT GIVES ME HOPE

I do have a hope that things will look different and that it will change for the better. But what gives me hope? This is hard to find, I know. I'll start with the easier answer: our movements of solidarity! When I was in military jail, I got support letters from people from all over the world. Most of the letters were from internationals, and some were from people in Israel. All of those letters were really the main thing that helped me remember why I was there.

I read them in the very difficult times - times when I thought "Why am I here?" Reading those letters really reminded me of what I'm doing and why I got in there in the first place. And it was really comforting to see the support of these people in the loneliest place I could be in – a place where everyone was thinking totally differently from me. Almost all the prisoners were totally against everything I thought. In the loneliest place, I read those letters, and I understood that I have a community of people. I know it's a community of people from all around the world. It still gives me hope to see that people from all around the world are hoping together for a different future.

My hope is that different people from different countries will eventually make their governments to pressure the Israeli government to change things and end the occupation. My ideal is a country without Jewish superiority; a country for all its citizens; a country where everyone is equal to one another. It's very far from that situation now. I think that from both sides, there is no possibility for this to happen now. I hope that eventually it might happen. And I know, it starts with smaller steps. Ending the occupation does not sound small, but it's an important step on the way to equality between the two nations. I think that pressure from around the world might be the only way that can change something here, because the Israeli government cannot stay on its own, without support from the United States and from the European countries. So, if they tell Israel that things must change, and if they impose sanctions, the Israeli government will eventually need to do something. This is my hope from around the world and from Israel.

In Israel, there are people -although not so many in numbers yet- who resist the army's actions and aspire for a different future. There are people who can see the crimes of the army and not turn a blind eye, and blindly accept anything that the army does. Knowing this gives me hope that someday, more and more people will understand what is going on and that it needs to change.

Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Israel

In Israel, the right to conscientious objection to military service is constantly violated. Young men and women who object to conscription experience repeated imprisonments in military jails.

In violation of international human rights standards, those who object are questioned by military personnel about the grounds of their objection and are very rarely granted exemption as conscientious objectors, and only for merely pacifist reasons.

Many objectors who eventually get an exception are not recognised as objectors and are released with various other exemptions, such as medical issues, that can sometimes even affect a young person's future, as some of these entries remain on their records. Israel does not recognise objections on political grounds or partial objections, such as the refusal to enlist in an army of occupation, which is also accused of crimes against humanity.

Miro

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I am 23 years old and currently studying to become a community educator at the University of Applied Sciences. In my free time, I work, study, play volleyball and floorball, and spend time with friends. In the future, I would like to work in NGOs which align with my studies. I want to work in a field where I can help others and live according to my values.

DECIDING TO BECOME A TOTAL CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR TO MILITARY SERVICE

My decision began in 2020. I initially applied for civil service, but later sent a letter stating that I would not participate and would instead become a total objector. The authorities informed the police, and I was questioned. About a year later, I received my custodial sentence. It began in July 2022 and lasted six months. I was released on 18 December 2022.
I chose this path for ethical reasons. I did not want to be part of a system I consider unjust, nor did I want to kill or learn to kill. Civil service was not an option for me because I believe it ignores the underlying problem: the military system and the compulsory nature of service for men. I felt strongly that I could not participate in something I considered unjust. I believe that if people do not object, nothing will ever change.

FACING THE CONSEQUENCES AT HOME AND IN MY SOCIAL LIFE

Initially, my family and friends were confused and asked whether I was certain about my decision, but they soon accepted it. I served my sentence at home with an ankle bracelet, and my family supported me throughout. I did not face difficulties with them.

Financially, the situation was manageable because I was able to keep my full-time job. Unlike military or civil service, where one receives only a small daily allowance and cannot work, I was able to earn a living. The most challenging aspect was scheduling, as I had to plan my daily activities in detail for two to three weeks at a time. This made it difficult to meet friends, as most people cannot plan that far ahead. However, it was manageable, especially since Covid restrictions limited social activities.
My sentence overlapped with the beginning

“I felt strongly that I could not participate in something I considered unjust. I believe that if people do not object, nothing will ever change.”

of the war in Ukraine, which had started about six months earlier. At work, I had to request my schedule early, but my supervisors were understanding. There are no lasting consequences now; it is not on my criminal record, and I can live as if nothing happened.

DISCOVERING MEDIA ATTENTION & CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT

Media coverage was generally neutral. When interviewed, I was able to present my perspective, and the media did not take sides. However, members of the public often form their own assumptions, and many view total objection negatively. I even received comments from some members of the Finnish Parliament saying that it is good that people like me weren't around during the Winter War.

People often reach out to me to ask how total objection works in Finland, and I am always happy to answer because there is limited information available and few people with direct experience. Many who do have experience prefer not to speak publicly due to fear of backlash, including hostile messages. I am willing to take a figurative bullet to answer these questions. I hope that in the future, more people will become total objectors so that there are additional voices contributing to the discussion. I do not consider myself a universal authority on the subject.

What encouraged me most was the support I received from family, friends, and like-minded people. A few people even sent messages on Instagram expressing that my actions were important. That support helped during the backlash I faced from Finnish society, as I was very public about my decision.

I also became involved with organisations such as EBCO and Connection e.V., and our Finnish local group collaborated with them. EBCO wished to meet me, and I was happy to do so. It was reassuring to see that many people across Europe share similar beliefs and that we are not alone.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND CONSCRIPTION IN FINLAND

Some of my friends completed civil service, and a few went to the army. I respect their choices and understand why some choose the army, as it lasts only six months, whereas civil service always lasts twelve. I also know people who began military service but switched to civil service because they did not want to continue.

I have not met many other total objectors. I

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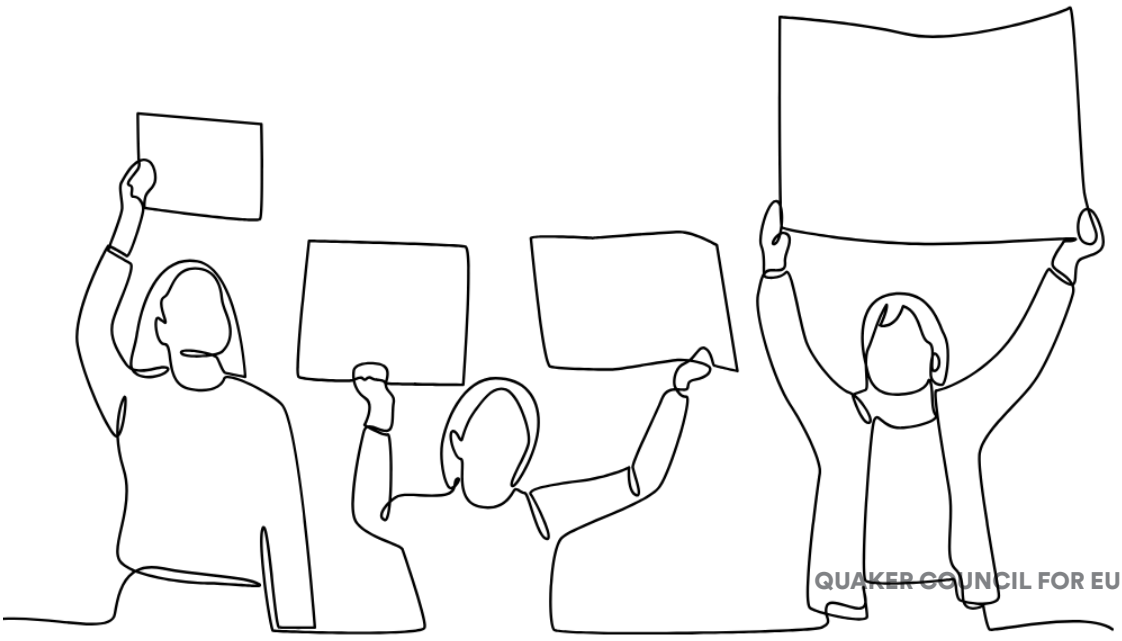


have met a few people who switched to total objection during the final weeks of their civil service, resulting in only a short sentence. However, I have never met another person my age who completed the full sentence. I have met one or two people who are around thirty years older than I am, and they served their sentences in prison.

The maximum age for conscription is around twenty-eight or twenty-nine. It is possible to postpone service for reasons such as education, but only for a limited number of years. Eventually, most people must serve unless they fall into specific exceptional categories. For example, professional athletes may postpone service, but even they must eventually complete it. Lauri Markkanen, for instance, returned from the United States to Finland to complete his military service.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE BETWEEN CULTURAL PRESSURE AND A POSSIBLE SHIFT IN PUBLIC OPINION

Patriotism is deeply rooted in Finnish culture. The war in Ukraine did not significantly change attitudes, as support for the military has always been strong. Only a small number of people travelled to Ukraine to participate in the war, and I do not believe the conflict substantially increased enthusiasm for military service.
There has been discussion about requiring women to serve as well, but so far, it remains only a discussion.

In schools, personal beliefs are not something you discuss with your teachers. The pressure to serve comes more from family, relatives, and cultural expectations. Many people grow up hearing repeatedly that they must go to the army, and this shapes attitudes from a young age.

Recently, Finland has faced criticism for purchasing defence systems from Israel. Many people question how Finland can buy weapons from a country involved in war and accused of genocide. I think it is positive that people are beginning to question these issues.

Traditionally, Finnish public debate focuses almost exclusively on Russia as the primary threat, but the war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza have prompted some to reconsider military spending. This represents a shift in public thinking.

> “Change occurs only through action. If people simply accept the status quo, nothing will change. Those who want change must take steps to achieve it.”

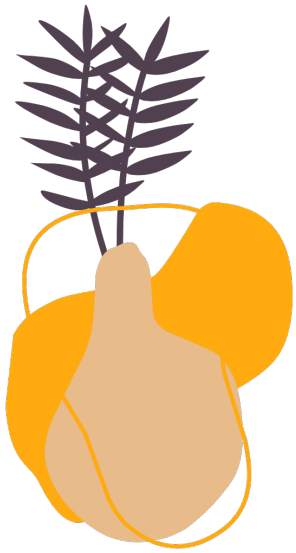
Ideally, I would like to see the conscription abolished, although I am not very optimistic. A voluntary army would be a significant im-

provement, but Finland currently appears to be moving in the opposite direction, discussing the possibility of expanding compulsory service. Time will tell what happens.

MY PERSONAL MESSAGE

The process is long. From the moment one declares the intention to become a total objector to the completion of the sentence, it may take several years. For me, the entire process lasted two years. It does not happen quickly.
Regarding backlash, it is important to be aware that some people will react negatively. It is important to stand by one's beliefs and to have support from friends and family, as it is difficult to manage alone. Speak openly with people you trust; good friends will understand and support you.

Change occurs only through action. If people simply accept the status quo, nothing will change. Those who want change must take steps to achieve it.



Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Finland

In Finland, all men must complete military service. Conscientious objection to military service is recognised in law, but the alternative service is longer than military service, and some conscientious objectors declare "total objection", refusing to serve the punitive alternative service, which, indeed, constitutes a violation of international human rights standards. Total objectors can face imprisonment. More information on the implementation and violation of the right to conscientious objection.

Roman & Alexander

ROMAN DUBROVIN

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I was born in Kazan, in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia. I enjoy hiking and spending time outdoors. I've been a vegetarian for 7 years now. I hold a bachelor's degree in ecology and environmental management. At that time, my studies were not just an abstract interest or a general alignment with my values; I intended to persist in this field. I was admitted to a state-funded Master's program at Kazan Federal University, focusing on natural and technological disasters and environmental rehabilitation. This path meant a great deal to me, as it reflected my values and the field I cared about. However, I was unable to complete my studies.

CHOOSING PACIFISM AND ECOLOGY

I have held pacifist views for a long time, and my education only strengthened my decision to oppose any war. When I started university, I was already against the Russian government and its actions, including the events related to Crimea and the broader direction of Russian foreign policy. I wanted to study something that aligned with my values, so I chose ecology over law or a technical field. I was becoming increasingly aware of the human and environmental consequences of war. At university, my activities went beyond my studies; I participated in peaceful protests in Kazan. Already at that time, I faced misunderstanding of my views and negative reactions from some members of the academic staff. However, I did not change my views and remained committed to them.

BREAKING OF THE WAR OF AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

A few weeks before the war began, we started studying a course called "Environmental Rehabilitation of Territories Affected by Armed Conflicts". Before that, our studies had focused on preventing environmental disasters and understanding their consequences. We learned how war can damage the environment, including forests, soil, and land, and how it can be restored afterwards. We understood that the consequences of war are often long-lasting and in many cases irreversible, affecting not only people, including long-term demographic impacts, but also the environment.

When the war started, I noticed that neither my lecturers nor the students seemed concerned that our country was attacking another one and harming its environment.

What struck me was that the focus was more on post-war rehabilitation than on preventing such destruction. This made me realise how close I was to something I fundamentally op-

posed, and it became a turning point for me.

I was increasingly overwhelmed by the fear that I could become a tool for addressing the consequences of actions I fundamentally disagreed with. Given that my field of study focused on post-disaster environmental rehabilitation, I feared I might be expected to take part in post-war restoration. I fundamentally disagreed with this and could not accept being involved in repairing the consequences of a war carried out by my own country.

We were taught not to harm the environment, yet our government was doing just that, and no one seemed to care. I could not accept dealing with the consequences of a war carried out by my own country, nor could I remain silent while being taught how to address them. For me, remaining silent would have meant being complicit. After several weeks of feeling helpless and alone, I decided to take action.

LEAVING RUSSIA TO GEORGIA

When the war started, I was not at risk of being conscripted because I was a university student, and students were exempt from military service.

I noticed that people in my surroundings avoided talking about the war. At the same time, I saw in the news that people who openly opposed the war or spoke out on social media about it were being arrested.

I began to feel increasingly conflicted. I was afraid of remaining silent, afraid of speaking out, and afraid of becoming complicit in what was happening. At the same time, my home, my family, my friends, and everything I had built were in Russia. Despite this, I realised that I could no longer live with this situation and decided to leave the country. I chose to go to neighbouring Georgia. It was difficult to get there at the time, but I managed to do so. As I was leaving the country, I was overwhelmed by the thought that I might never return, as leaving Russia had already marked me as someone opposed to the war.

Instead, leaving Russia was not only a moral choice for me but also a way to stay true to my beliefs and feel less alone in opposing the war. Although I could have continued my studies, I realised they were no longer separate from what was happening. I realised that I could not remain in a country that was waging war, occupying another country, and destroying the environment.

Shortly after leaving, I began speaking out openly against the war and took part in public demonstrations. I also connected with people and organisations who shared my opposition, which gave me a renewed sense of purpose and made me realise that I was not alone.

> “Leaving Russia was not only a moral choice for me but also a way to stay true to my beliefs and feel less alone in opposing the war.”

EXPERIENCING THE CONSEQUENCES OF SAYING ‘NO’ TO WAR

Leaving without a long-term plan, I did not fully understand what awaited me, or how my connection to my home country would gradually fade while the pressure on me increased.

The decision to leave Russia was not easy and affected me in many ways. I lost many of my connections, including friends, family, and my wider social circle, and I often think about my hometown.

I realised I was taking a risk by leaving behind my old, comfortable and planned life. After leaving, I knew my stay might not be temporary and that I would need to build a new life in another country, adapting to local laws and finding ways to support myself, including through remote work, as it was difficult to secure other jobs.

For a period of time, I legally worked with an Australian company and paid taxes in accordance with the Georgia law. However, everything changed on March 1, 2026, when new Georgian laws introduced additional requirements for foreigners to obtain work permission in regulated fields, pay associated fees, and apply for a temporary residence permit. To obtain the required documents, foreigners must meet stricter criteria in order to continue working.

As I was unable to meet the new legislation's requirements and the costs of complying with it were increasing, I decided to stop my work, which had been my main source of income, to remain in compliance with the law. I understood that this would leave me without income, but it gave me some time. At the same time, I faced increasing uncertainty about my future, as my permitted stay was limited and I did not know where to go next.
I was also unable to work online with companies in my home country. I faced increasing practical difficulties due to being outside the country and being unable to return.

BEING LABELED AS A "DRAFT EVADER"

I have lost access to basic services and face limitations in employment and financial matters. This is due to severe restrictions imposed on me as I am considered a draft evader, despite trying to resolve the situation legally. However, these efforts have been unsuccessful, and the conditions for lifting these restrictions are virtually impossible to fulfil, as they require me to appear in person, which I am unable to do.

Politically, my anti-war views and activism mean that returning home is not a safe option for me, as I am seen by the authorities as a considered draft evader and as someone who may be discrediting the policies of the Russian Federation. There is no way back to Russia for me.

FACING FAMILY REACTION AND SOCIAL STIGMA

My parents were contacted by the military authorities regarding my case and were asked to influence me, which caused them significant stress.

They are concerned that, from the state's perspective, I am in violation of the law. They are unfamiliar with the concept of conscientious objection and unsure whether refusal of military service is recognised in practice.

I try to reassure them that my actions are based on my personal convictions and that my decision is a matter of conscience, not an attempt to evade my responsibilities. They are concerned that a criminal case may be opened against me.

I am deeply concerned for them, as they are directly exposed to accusations and statements from the authorities regarding my case.

However, they do not fully understand why I chose this path. When I explain that my moral beliefs prevent me from participating in any war, they find it difficult to distinguish between conscientious objection and draft evasion. As a result, my position is often perceived through this lens.

The same is true for most people in my country. For them, being a conscientious objector is the same as being a draft evader - not someone who refuses to serve because of moral beliefs.

For most of my relatives, I am just a draft evader, and they do not care about my reasons, even though I have moral grounds for my decision. Some of them consider me a traitor to the country.

With most of my friends, it is the same, though some understand I don't want to join the army. Still, they do not understand what a conscientious objector is.

What I fear most is being misunderstood, which is why I cannot speak openly about this with everyone in my circle.

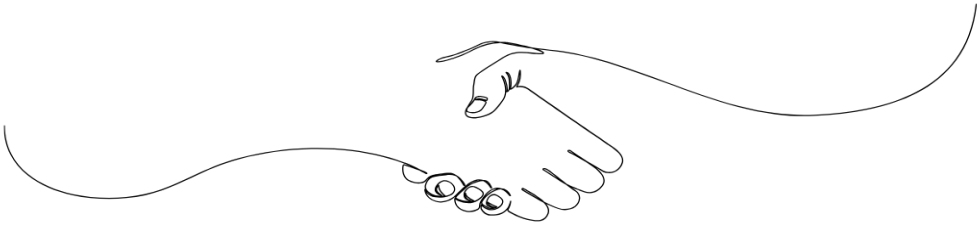
The same is true even among some people who left Russia. Despite being abroad, they also tend to see my situation as draft evasion rather than a matter of conscience. As a result, I often experience isolation and a lack of understanding, both within my home country and outside it.

Some of them advise me to simply avoid the authorities and "stay out of reach." However, I do not see myself as someone trying to evade the law. This creates significant internal pressure, as I am made to feel as if I am doing something wrong.

> "My actions are based on my personal convictions and that my decision is a matter of conscience, not an attempt to evade my responsibilities. ."

CULTIVATING HOPE

Despite these challenges, I find hope in looking ahead.



I hope my story can help others better understand conscientious objection and make it less frightening to speak about. I also hope that conscientious objection will be respected and more widely recognised. In the future, I want to continue speaking about the importance of choosing a peaceful path.

Today, more than ever, it is important to speak about this and raise awareness of the issue.

I hope the war will end. I believe that people will better understand the human cost of both actions and inaction.

People should speak out, share their views, and make their voices heard without fear. If many people speak about justice and about this war against Ukraine, then maybe those voices would be heard, and the war might end and help ensure that this does not happen again.

So we should bring our voice to society, to the community, so they would know that there is another way, not only this bloody way of fighting and killing others.

MY PERSONAL MESSAGE

My final message is to defend your views, to defend what you love, your family, your country, and the precious things in your life. Defend them openly, not secretly. Do not give up or surrender on this path. Continue to struggle for peace. I would have appreciated it if someone had told me the same, because at times I feel I am slowly giving up.

“My final message is to defend your views, to defend what you love, your family, your country, and the precious things in your life. Defend them openly, not secretly. Do not give up or surrender on this path. Continue to struggle for peace.”

ALEXANDER

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I was born in 1999 in a small town in the Ivanovo Region of Russia. In my hometown, almost everyone knows each other.

I spent most of my life with my family in a one-room apartment: my parents, my brother, and me. We had a friendly relationship, and we did not have lasting conflicts. I studied in an ordinary school. After graduation, I moved to the regional capital to attend university. I studied at the local polytechnic university for four years.

When I started university, I had a girlfriend from Ukraine. I loved her, we lived together, and we started thinking about the future and making plans.
I graduated with a degree in quality management, and according to the law, I was supposed to serve in the army.

I returned home and lived with my girlfriend at my registered address. The military enlistment office put pressure on me, calling me up for compulsory service, and suggested that I consider other options instead. But then I would have to serve two years under an alternative military contract.

There are missile regiments around this town, and in the town itself, there is a division of the Strategic Missile Forces with nuclear warheads. I knew about this but never really thought much about it. I just expected to serve and then return to normal life.

In December 2021, before the war, I signed the contract and was assigned to a regiment. I was shocked by the poor conditions: dilapidated buildings, old equipment, and walls covered with propaganda posters that hid the decay. When I received my gear, they gave me old, worn-out uniforms, torn in some places, and torn combat boots of different sizes. At that time, there was a military shop right next to the division where everything was available, and you could buy any uniform you needed.

My complaints only earned me curses from the commanders, who told me that from then on I would have to buy my own gear, hinting at that shop. Meanwhile, I saw officers sitting in bars, drinking wine, and acting indifferent. Growing up next to this division, I never imagined such dysfunction. Once my service began, I was immediately assigned to various shifts. At that time, I was not granted security clearance for these duties, and the commander ordered me to use someone else's pass to enter the unit. Later, I realised I was working for someone else, who was getting paid for my labour. This was a common practice. One commander even threatened to break my legs if I told anyone.

BREAKING OF THE WAR OF AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

I was already serving when I learned about the war. I decided I did not want to fight another country or kill anyone.

When the war with Ukraine began, I watched TV and listened to the commanders. They told us completely false things. I always carried my phone with internet access, followed the news about the war, and drew my own conclusions. I am ready to defend my homeland, but I immediately understood that this was clearly an attack on our side. For me, it's clear: our leader has gone mad.

This is unacceptable to me; these people are our neighbours, brothers, and sisters. Many of them came to work for us, and we went to them. Besides, I have relatives in Horlivka (Donetsk region), which is now occupied. Therefore, it was a huge shock and left a lasting impact on me.

Fortunately, at the beginning of the war, I was lucky because I served in a strategic military unit meant to defend the country from nuclear threats. At first, soldiers from this unit were not sent to the war.
But over time, some soldiers from our unit were sent to the war because of heavy losses, even

though we were stationed at a strategic site. At first it was voluntary, then the officers started forcing them. The pressure was mainly put on conscripts.

I saw how officers forced young people who had just arrived at the unit to sign contracts so they could be sent to the front. They gathered them in a separate building and applied psychological pressure. The hardest hit were those without parents. I approached them in secret and talked to them. I managed to calm down several people and talk them out of signing the contract. As it turned out later, I literally saved their lives.

Gradually, they started pushing people to join the frontline unit. At first a few, then more. They'd say, "Sign a contract, and you'll go defend the motherland." I refused. Then the threats started. The practice there became: whoever refused to sign a contract was put into a motorised rifle regiment and quickly sent to the front. I saw many people, under pressure, go and sign up for this. Those who held a different opinion or resisted the situation were sent to the front lines as a punishment.

The pressure from officers increased as conscript numbers fell. Officially, only some were sent to war, but unofficially, many others followed. I will never forget the day they quietly sent 500 soldiers from our unit to the front, without a chance to even say goodbye to their families.

Later, they started bringing back the dead and wounded to our unit.

WITNESSING DEATH

At first, this was kept secret, but it started happening more often. One day, my commanders forced me to go to the military airport in the regional capital without telling me why. That was where they secretly brought the bodies of fallen soldiers. I saw large planes, probably IL-76s, filled with coffins, packed tightly. We were forced to load them onto a Kamaz truck, and I had to ride in the back, on top of the coffins. I overheard officers whispering. Some of my acquaintances who started serving with me left and never returned. I tried to warn others, urging them not to go. I managed to convince a few young conscripts not to sign contracts or give in to pressure. I talked with them, explained their options, and invited them to join me, but they didn't understand. Maybe they were scared or believed the propaganda.

"I managed to convince a few young conscripts not to sign contracts or give in to pressure. I talked with them, explained their options, and invited them to join me, but they didn't understand. Maybe they were scared or believed the propaganda. They left. Now, as far as I know, they are dead."

They left. Now, as far as I know, they are dead. In our region, 10 to 20 dead are brought back every week.

SEARCHING FOR A WAY OUT

My main reason for wanting to leave the army

was that I did not want to kill anyone or take part in violence. This was unacceptable to me, so I decided to leave. I filed complaints to try to end my contract. I tried to transfer to other organisations and was even accepted into the Ministry of Internal Affairs in my hometown. I also tried to get a medical exemption, but my health was too good for that. After Putin signed the mobilisation decree, all my attempts were denied. I saw orders from the Supreme Command telling commanders to send a certain number of people to the front.

Even after my contract expired, I was kept in the military unit for another eight months. I refused to sign any papers and started working with a lawyer who helped me with different issues.

I had some money and applied to an organisation that helps people escape. They explained how to leave Russia, and I managed to leave.

LIFE AFTER ESCAPE

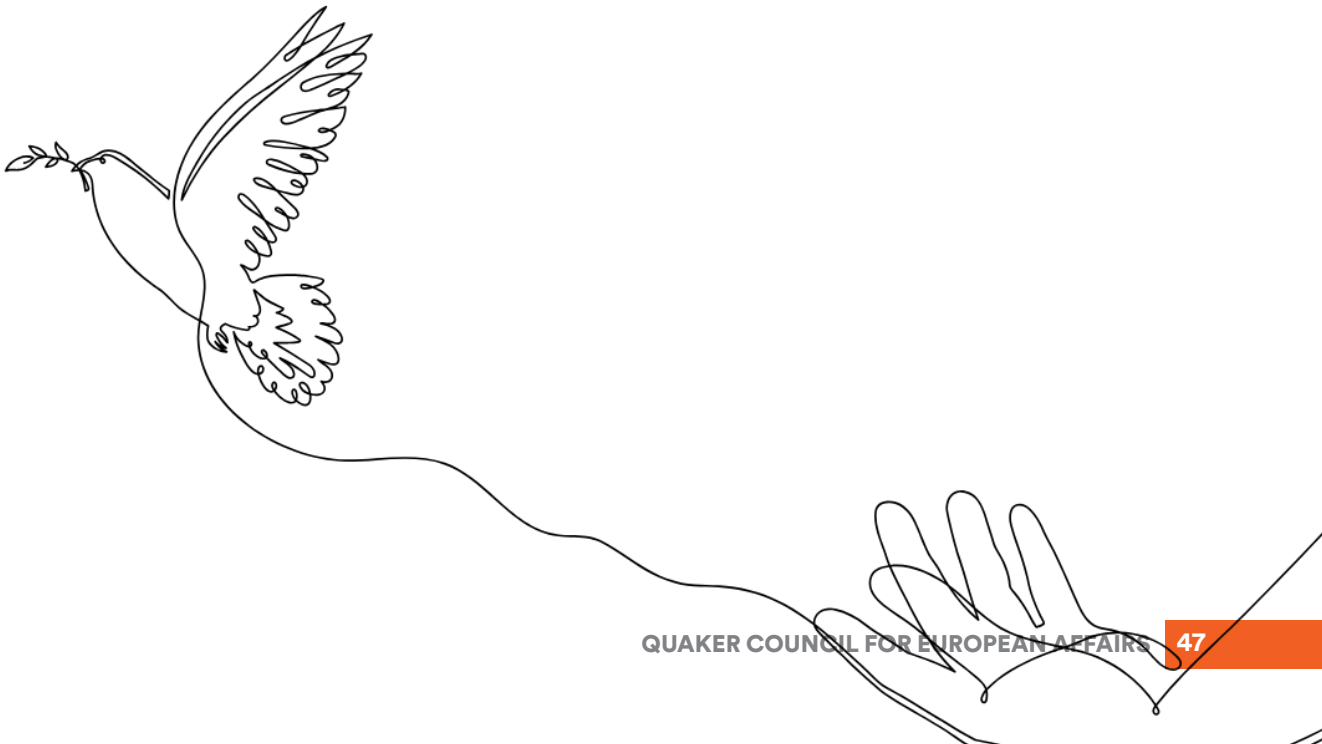
Right now, I am in relative safety, but the reality is more complicated.

In Russia, a criminal case was opened against me for unauthorised absence from my unit, and I was put on a wanted list. My parents were harassed: they came to their workplace, threatened them, and tapped their phones. I still don't know how they are, because contacting them could cause them even more trouble.

Decent people remained in my unit, and I learned that military police from my hometown came to this country twice looking for me. They didn't find me then. On the advice of human rights defenders, I went with them to the local police and turned myself in – they explained it was necessary to legalise my status. So on July 17, 2025, I was detained. Immediately after that, people from my military unit called and came to me. When they called, I roughly understood who it was. I was alone in the detention cell. Through the window, I saw cars with Russian license plates. I was shocked to see and recognise those people. They walked under the window, demanding that I be handed over, claiming that I was their soldier.

On July 20, I was released. At the exit, Russian military personnel had set up a watch, and also brought in soldiers from the 102nd Russian base. I was saved by Armenian police and human rights defenders. This case was widely covered in the media.

I am grateful to Armenia. Its police and human rights defenders proved that even in a terrible situation, there is protection. They acted professionally and humanely, despite external pressure. They saved me from kidnapping. Thank them for that. Now I am in a safer place. I plan to move to a completely safe one soon. Even though I am in a safer place, this issue still affects me. I have been attending psychological support sessions for almost two years, as well as lectures on providing primary psychological



help to people in similar situations. I completed it successfully and received a certificate, which confirms my readiness to help others.

MY PERSONAL MESSAGE

My message to soldiers or young people considering joining the army and serving. Don't do that.

If you are already in the army, leave. Escape if you can.

I urge you to avoid fighting against Ukrainians in any way you can. If you do, you risk becoming a criminal by following orders to commit crimes. My message is simple: leave the army.

I know I made the right choice. I didn't want to kill or die. I want to live, work, and start a family. I also want to help other conscientious objectors who choose this path. I have the experience and the desire to help. I believe that truth is stronger than fear.

Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Russia

The Russian Federation enforces compulsory military service. Although the right to conscientious objection to military service is envisioned in the Constitution with the possibility for alternative service, it has become harder to obtain the status of conscientious objector.

Before the war of aggression in Ukraine began, approximately 40% of applications for civilian service were approved; now, according to data from civil society organisations, that figure stands at around 20%. At the same time, there have been reports of forced conscription (including in the occupied territories of Ukraine) and of young recruits being forced to sign contracts with the military that formally enrol them as professional volunteer soldiers.

“My message to soldiers or young people considering joining the army and serving. Don’t do that. If you are already in the army, leave. Escape if you can.”

Taxio

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I'm Taxio Ardanaz. I was born in Pamplona. I've lived in Bilbao most of the time. I'm forty-seven years old, and I'm an artist.

I work a lot with various forms of visual expression created during times of conflict or repression. That has driven much of my research as an artist. Right now, I am preparing a book that will be published in a few months, hopefully by September 2026. It brings together a very extensive archive that I have been compiling for years across the whole country. It includes graffiti, slogans, drawings, carvings, all kinds of visual expressions created from the Civil War up to 1952, in the post-war period, in frontline areas, battlefields and prisoner-of-war camps. Also, in prisons, concentration camps, and various other places used as prisons.

I have also worked extensively in the context of the Civil War on memory, on historical memory, analysing and critically examining what kind of memory is built, how we revisit these conflict-ridden episodes of the past, and what the contemporary approach to all this is like through monuments, various visual expressions, and museums.

I do this from an antimilitarist perspective. There is a critical perspective that, in many aspects of historical memory in Spain, I feel is lacking. It is not just about remembering episodes of the Civil War, which in Spain remains a very painful subject. It is highly contentious and still very necessary. There are issues of justice that still need to be addressed, relating to the disappeared and mass graves.

There is another aspect that stems from my work as an artist, not so much as an archaeologist or historian, although I also do that tangentially. It concerns what kind of visual expressions, representations, and memories are built through the visual arts and through aesthetics.

ARTISTIC APPROACH AND RESEARCH: GRAFFITI AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

I am very interested in the intersection between cultural production in the broadest sense and aesthetic production. There is an intersection between the amateur, the collective, the political, the propagandistic, and art. It is not any one thing in particular, but it cuts across everything.

There are very interesting intersections ranging from publications to the graffiti I am study-

ing, for example, which was done in a convent where militiamen were stationed and drew, or prisoners did. That kind of expression in such difficult times intrigues me, and I am interested in thinking about it from the perspective of personal practice, too.

Why devote myself to art, and why in a more turbulent time? We are in a very extreme political moment, so I ask myself why I should keep making art. It is a question I ask every time I go to the studio and study these expressions, analyse where they come from and why.

It also helps me understand what tools people equip themselves with collectively, because I believe they are tools for building collectivity, building subjectivity, or even resisting.

It is not about calling it art therapy. It is about situations where someone goes into a prison or to the front line to draw, beyond strict political propaganda or official boundaries. That is where many things happen that interest me, and I want to bring them to light and reflect on them.

Graffiti is a very basic form of expression, very human, in the sense that it has existed throughout history. It is about leaving a mark and demonstrating one's existence. It comes from a need. I like to think that to the extent we do these things, we are. That visual expression defines us.

When it is done in a group, outside official channels. In prison or war, it goes beyond that and speaks of another kind of humanity. That is what interests me.

The problem is that when working with archives and looking back, there is a danger of glorifying historical processes in which violence is assumed to be a key factor in change. As an antimilitarist, I try to dismantle that vision that glorifies heroism, violence and resistance. I try to understand resistance from other perspectives.

That is my personal battle through art. It also involves monuments. We are surrounded by monuments. They keep being built. The question is why we need to build another monument, how we should do it, who we are commemorating, and why.

A few years ago, I was invited to create a memorial for nine people shot in my grandfather's village in Navarre during the war. I spent two years reflecting on what kind of monument I could create. That was very interesting.

> "(...) there is a danger of glorifying historical processes in which violence is assumed to be a key factor in change. As an antimilitarist, I try to dismantle that vision that glorifies heroism, violence and resistance. I try to understand resistance from other perspectives."

I tried to avoid verticality and materials that are always repeated, like steel or stone, and think differently. Commemorative practice often repeats the very patterns it is supposed to avoid. There is a lot going on there.

BECOMING A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

I was a deserter. I was one of the last conscientious objectors in Spain. I took part in the conscientious objection campaign in the barracks, which was the final phase of the campaign that ended in 2000. I can never remember if it was 2000 or 2001 when compulsory military service ended. I think it was 2000.

In 1996, we launched the barracks insubordination campaign across the country as part of the conscientious objection movement. In 1997, at the first presentation, five of us deserters appeared. We went to the barracks, signed our military papers, and the next day, or even at that moment, we did not return.

This was a strategic shift aimed at bypassing legal changes from 1995 and 1996, which had stopped the imprisonment of conscientious objectors and replaced it with disqualification. There were no longer prison sentences, but loss of civil rights. It shifted the debate into broader questions about the demobilisation of people on the streets.

To respond to that, and reframe the debate in strictly military terms, a campaign was launched. I joined the MOC in 1995 or thereabouts. I did it because I had read Epicurus, and through David Thoreau, I wanted to take part in civil disobedience.

In 1997, there was a campaign introducing the first conscientious objectors, and in 1998, I was already tried by a court-martial.

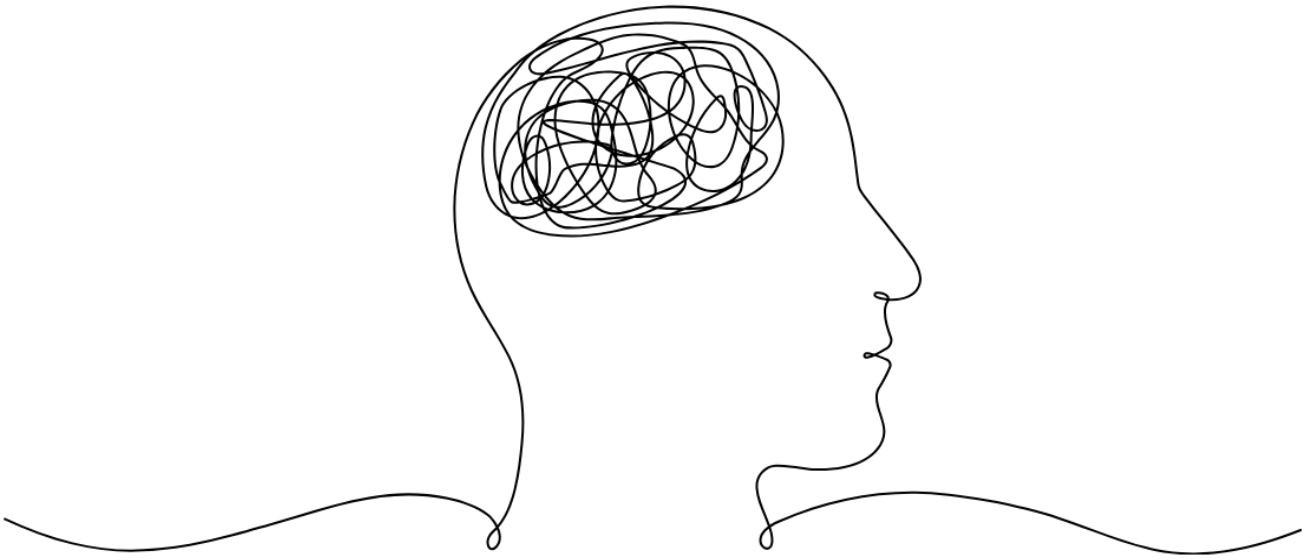
The first presentation was in Madrid on 6 March 1997. Five of us from Valencia, Pamplona and Bilbao went to the military government headquarters. We chained ourselves to the gates. They did not arrest us, so we returned home.

After that, I carried out two more actions: one break-in at the military government headquarters in Pamplona, Navarre, and another at the barracks where a soldier had deserted. We were not arrested for the first one. For the second, we were brought before a judge, gave statements and were released on bail.

About a year later, I was summoned to a court-martial in A Coruña, Galicia. I was facing a ten-year sentence because the charges combined the two break-ins, desertion, and theft of military kit. At that point, I was facing a ten-year prosecution.

Eventually, the two break-ins were dismissed, and the sentence for desertion became two years and four months, similar to what conscientious objectors received before civilian sentences replaced prison.

I continued studying Fine Arts in Bilbao during this time. I did not request deferrals for military



service. In 1996, I had already started university.

While I was on trial, many people from the university came to support me. It took two buses to travel to A Coruña. I continued my life more or less normally.

After about a year, we discovered I was wanted by the police. While preparing another protest action, I was arrested unexpectedly at my parents' front door and taken to the military prison in Alcalá de Henares, Madrid.

JOINING THE MOC (MOVEMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS)

I read about civil disobedience, particularly David Thoreau. I was studying at a Jesuit school at the time. A literature teacher was assigned to us, a missionary who had returned from Zaire to Pamplona to care for his mother, who was ill. He began teaching us literature, and I am not sure why, but it opened my mind.

Among the range of antimilitarist groups that existed in Pamplona, similar to those across the Basque Country and Euskal Herria, I chose the MOC because state-level coordination was important to me, as was its antimilitarist discourse, which was close to the libertarian sphere.

The MOC membership base has always been a mix of libertarians, Christians, and different currents. The two main pillars of the conscientious objection movement were rooted in those areas. I was also part of the CNT, and I was essentially a pacifist.

There were other proposals more focused on rejection of the Spanish army or more aligned with pro-independence positions. At that time, I joined the MOC out of affinity.

The MOC has always had a state-level perspective. It has tried to coordinate all actions at that level, or at least ensure the widest possible coordination.

That also implied being part of WRI.

The first official presentation, the launch of the campaign, was coordinated at the state level. After that, once we were not arrested, we returned to our hometowns and organised further actions there.

Everything was always coordinated as far as possible, depending on the reality of each group.

I moved between Pamplona and Bilbao, two cities about two hours apart. I continued with my studies while coordinating with the group in Pamplona and also the one in Bilbao. I maintained basic contact with Pamplona until I was eventually arrested there.

> "When you are doing what you want, despite the fears and difficulties at a family and emotional level, you continue."

IMPRISONMENT

They took me away. I spent two days in detention, first in a National Police cell. After a night there, I was transferred to the Civil Guard, where I spent another night in their barracks. After two days, I was taken in a van to the military prison.

There is only one military prison in the country, in Madrid, and it is still operating. It is a small prison. When I arrived, there were already two prisoners there.

I was not among the first to be sent. I was part of the second wave of prisoners. Others had al-

ready been held there before us. The first conscientious objectors imprisoned there suffered assaults with the collusion of prison guards.

That initial conflict between the military prison and conscientious objectors was resolved quickly. Due to political and social responses at the time, things had calmed down by the time we arrived. There were still tensions, but they were less severe.

At the peak of the draft refusal movement, there were seven of us in a prison of around thirty inmates. The block we were in was for regular troops. There was another block for officers and non-commissioned officers, who lived in much better conditions.

We shared the prison with professional soldiers, Civil Guards, and conscripts. In principle, they were similar to us: conscripts who had left the barracks for a weekend, gone out partying, and not returned. That was the most common offence. They usually served three months and were released.

There were also other crimes, such as theft, drugs, and occasionally murder, common criminal offences. It was a relatively small prison, quite tolerable by prison standards.

There were always tensions, but over time they eased. We had to constantly negotiate with the institution and with the military structure.

The sentence was served according to the law. I spent seven months in second-degree imprisonment. At that point, you were entitled to request third-degree status. I spent fourteen months in third-degree detention, meaning I went to sleep there every night.

After that, I was on probation for another seven months.

When I was in the third-degree detention, I was in a separate wing. You had to go to prison, but it was not the same as for other prisoners. It was part of the prison, but separate.

In the third degree, you normally went from Monday to Friday to sleep. On Saturdays and Sundays, you slept at home. The rest of the days, you had to return every night. For me, that was the hardest part.

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF IMPRISONMENT

When you are doing what you want, despite the fears and difficulties at a family and emotional level, you continue. It was a long process that dragged on longer than expected. At the time, it was tough, especially when suddenly the prosecution was asking for ten years. There was a moment when you asked yourself: “What am I getting myself into?”

What I remember most is the feeling of really wanting to do what I was doing. I remember it very vividly, especially because I have always strongly believed in civil disobedience, and in being able to act on that belief, and in feeling that collective strength. I remember it very strongly.

It is true that the third degree was harder, because everything becomes more blurred there. You are neither prisoner nor free; you lose that prisoner role where you receive visits and clearly know your position. I continued study-

ing at university, at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Madrid, but I lost that more visible role. You are still suffering repression, but without that clear identity.

It was harder, and it lasted longer, but overall, I have a very powerful memory of it all. Both the direct nonviolent actions and the capacity to carry them out. That has always been very important to me. And that is precisely what I think I miss most nowadays.

FAMILY IMPACT

It was difficult for them, and they did not understand. Even at the trial, they struggled to understand why I was doing it. The first reaction was: "Why are you doing this when someone else could do it? Why are you the one going? If you don't go, nothing changes. Why are you doing this to us?"

People go through different phases, but by the time they went to A Coruña for the trial, with the buses, the demonstration outside, and the massive media coverage, they understood the scale of what I was doing. They realised it was not a personal matter, but that there were many people behind it, and a real drive for change. It was not just my story; it was a collective story.

At that point, they understood I was involved in something bigger than they had initially thought. After that, support during imprisonment was good, and things became more normal.

The University of the Basque Country has a significant support programme for prisoners who want to study. I received a lot of support. There have been many prisoners there for a long time, so the university has systems that make things easier.

I had visits in prison from lecturers, support during the third degree, and I was able to continue almost all my subjects with relative normality.

What was difficult was how long the legal deadlines dragged on, and the uncertainty about arrests. Sometimes we had to wait due to state-level coordination, and sometimes arrests did not happen when expected. That process lasted a long time.

On a personal level, being in hiding for longer than expected was difficult. In the end, I had to be in hiding for so long that I was arrested at home. It became too long to sustain, although I was very committed to it.

Because we were from different places, everyone made their own decisions depending on their circumstances. The important thing was the first phase, especially maintaining the element of surprise, so we could not be arrested before the official presentation in Madrid.

As soon as I deserted from the barracks, I went into hiding in a village in Navarre and stayed there until going directly to Madrid for the action. It was a form of hiding.

After that, it became more complicated. In Bilbao, I felt more at ease and continued studying. In Pamplona, I felt more insecure, although I returned there to prepare for other actions. In the end, I could not avoid it.

The difference between Bilbao and Pamplona was that I felt Bilbao was a bigger city. It was mainly a feeling. There were more people, basically.

SUPPORT GROUPS DURING DETENTION

The support group was mainly made up of close friends, the inner circle. It was essentially the closest people around me. The support groups we had were mainly sustained by friends from those closest circles.

The support group organised practical matters, for example, visits. They coordinated them. As we were away from our home town, people came from further afield. We had visits from the MOC in Madrid, who came every week. Mothers of former conscientious objectors

or activists also came regularly, I think every week. So we had to organise all of that alongside visits from family and friends, from wherever they were.

That is how the support group functioned. When I was arrested, they also organised things. They were there, and one person acted as the link between me and the MOC.

It is difficult for me to separate what it meant, because they were my friends. It is very difficult to distinguish. I should thank them properly at some point. I almost took it for granted that, as my friends, they had to do it. Everything became mixed together, for better or worse. Even my partner at the time did some administrative work that they did not have to do, but they still did it.

During one of the presentations, we climbed a tree on the military government grounds. In another, we entered the barracks where I had deserted. There were ten or eleven people involved, from the MOC, support groups, and friends of both me and another insubordinate. They were people who were very committed to the struggle, and some of them were exposing themselves to prison sentences.

BELIEFS AND REFLECTION OVER TIME

I still think the same. I do not think my convictions have changed. But now it feels like a time to rethink many things.

This concerns the position of anti-war movements, the left, and political parties. The shift is not only due to the war in Ukraine, although that has also been difficult to witness. The memory of conscientious objection in Spain has been very short-lived. I speak to people in their thirties who know nothing about it.

That is difficult, not only because the memory has been lost, but because there are issues we used to take for granted. The antiwar discourse seemed to have won, but that is no longer the case, and we have gone backwards in that sense.

There is also the question of what people are willing to give up. When I speak to younger people about the experience of prison, it is not about prison itself, but about what is possible, what people are prepared to do, or believe is possible to do. That idea has disappeared from many people's imaginations.

Not that everyone has to go to prison, but there is a form of response that includes accepting that possibility. I think that possibility has largely disappeared among younger people.

There are still many struggles, and many forms of resistance, and many things are being done well and better than before. I am not saying young people do nothing. But there is something that used to feel obvious in our time that now feels absent.

There is also another shift: things we thought were politically settled, including the antiwar consensus, have changed. Since the war in Ukraine, even positions that were once taken for granted are now being justified differently, including rearmament, and things that previously would not have been defended are now being defended.

THE END OF CONSCRIPTION

At that time, I was in third-degree detention. We still had comrades inside. We had a house we called the "insu-flat" in Alcalá de Henares. We rented it so that people leaving prison could stay there, and also for those visiting prisoners. It functioned entirely for that purpose.

The end of conscription brought both joy and uncertainty, and it took time to process.

On one hand, we always had to remember that the draft was not the goal, but a step towards ending the army. I often explained that we created significant pressure. We built a broad civil society movement across the state and managed to corner the government and the army.

At the same time, the decision did not come

solely because of us, but perhaps due to a European directive or the professionalisation of the Armed Forces. It was necessary to keep reminding people of that.

For the antimilitarist movement, the transition was difficult. It took years to find its place again. During the "No to the Iraq War" movement, there was another intense moment, and it became clear that collaboration with other collectives was necessary.

Since the genocide in Palestine, it has become even clearer that the MOC alone cannot do everything it used to. A network is needed. At the same time, the message of the MOC can only be delivered by the MOC at certain moments.

This took time to understand. The MOC was a major force during the draft resistance campaign, and that should be recognised. Not with pride, but with awareness of its significance.

We often had to insist that we were against the army, and that this was only one step. The struggle did not end there. It meant you could not fully enjoy the moment.

At the same time, there were prisoners while conscription was disappearing. That contradiction gave us a great deal of media visibility. It was well used strategically, not as a gamble, but it worked. Some people questioned it, asking why there were still conscientious objectors if the system was ending. But we continued.

Reconnecting afterwards with the landscape and the movement was a difficult process.

I think I served the full sentence. Afterwards, I returned to Pamplona and Bilbao to continue studying. I had to report to the police station every two weeks. The legal offence itself disappeared, but I am not entirely sure how that worked in legal terms.

After completing the sentence, I returned to studying in Bilbao and remained connected to the MOC for several years. Later, I drifted away from it, at least from the level of involvement I had before.

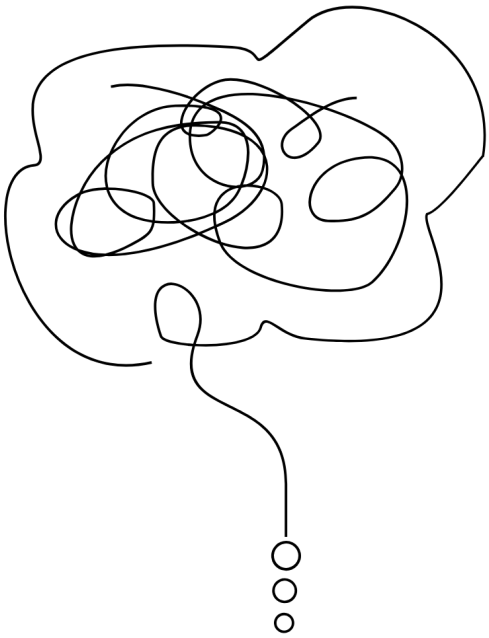
The overall feeling was uncertainty. I think that was the general feeling. Everything was shaken.

YOUNGER GENERATIONS AND CHANGES OF MILITANT IMAGINARIES

I've been working for a few years, giving workshops on Historical Memory in secondary schools, using graffiti and stencil art as tools. That has been my method. I've also taken part in other experiences with children, teenagers, and youth workers.

One thing I've noticed comes from informal conversations. The first time this issue came up was when I made a film about everything I've been telling you, about the memory of the Civil War, the contemporary memory of the Civil War through museums, the musealisation of battle sites, and different commemorative practices such as historical reenactments, tributes, and archaeology.

I was invited to show this film in something called "Route to Exile", which has been running for several years. It is a kind of fifteen-day summer camp where around thirty or forty young people are taken to different Civil War sites related mainly to repression and exile.



I remember they asked me, “Why do you work so much on the Civil War?”. I don’t have any direct link. My maternal grandfather fought on the Francoist side, but I never spoke to him about it. My paternal grandfather was very young and did not fight, and he never told me anything either. So I don’t have a direct family connection that explains my interest. I said I did not really know, maybe I am interested because I am antimilitarist, but nothing more.

What struck me most was their expressions, surprise and disbelief. It is not only that they do not know the history of a movement that was so relevant just twenty years ago. That already seems serious to me, because when we talk about historical memory, we are referring to events from eighty or ninety years ago. But when it comes to recent historical memory, such as the draft resistance campaign, perhaps the most important movement in the Spanish state since the Transition, there is no memory of it. Two decades later, it simply does not exist.

I felt very sad. From that moment, which was four years ago, I started trying to talk more about it and take more time to explain it, because I realised I was not doing that enough. Suddenly, I understood that perhaps it was my responsibility, because it had already been forgotten.

I began to wonder why that dimension of struggle had been lost. I don’t know if it has to do with the present moment, with the rise of fascism and everything we have experienced in the last two years since the genocide. Everything has become so distorted, and fascism feels so close, that on one hand, there seems to be a return to forms of struggle that favour direct confrontation, even violent confrontation, as the only way to respond and resist fascism.

On the other hand, everything is polarised, and along the way, we always lose. Ever since the post-First World War and Second World War periods, antimilitarism has often been dismissed as naïve. But we have returned to that point, being seen as naïve, as people who do not understand, as people who are told that fascism will come and kill you. It feels like we are back at square one.

I do not really know. I feel somewhat disoriented. Socially, and this will sound like an older person’s comment, and I do not like saying it, but I think social media does not help.

At the same time, I recognise that this is a very personal, perhaps generational perception. I think we have lost certain things connected to the street, to the body, to physical confrontation, to embodied resistance, to direct nonviolent action. Things are still being done, but not like before.

For example, in the Basque Country, when ETA was disappearing or had already ceased armed activity, young people from the abertzale or pro-independence left adopted many of those forms of struggle for a time. They carried out very powerful civil disobedience campaigns, passive nonviolent resistance, and blockades to protect people who were being arrested, in a context of police raids and repression against activists who were accused of belonging to ETA. After many years of rejecting those tools of struggle, there was a moment when they were reclaimed and made their own, and that was very powerful to see. But later that also faded. It is as if all the paradigms of resistance and struggle have shifted so much.

Then, in 2017 and 2018, with 8M and the feminist wave, the feminist movement also took up much of that knowledge. I find it difficult to talk about this without falling into nostalgia

or into the idea that things were done better before. That is not what I mean. But there is something I miss.

POSSIBILITY OF CONSCRIPTION RETURNING AND RESPONSES

I am a bit more optimistic there. I do not want to be too catastrophic. Even though I am saying all this, I am not entirely negative.

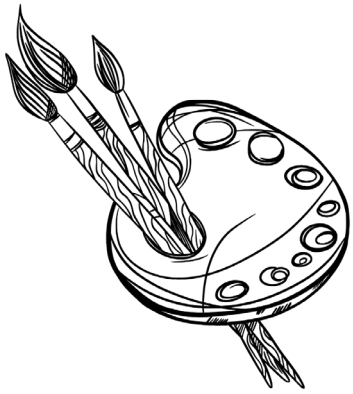
I think something like the return of conscription would be an important shock. It would structure a response. The antiwar movement today, just as the solidarity movement with Palestine has been one of the strongest in the Spanish state, shows that capacity still exists.

For example, what happened last summer with the boycott of the Vuelta Ciclista brought us back to moments where direct nonviolent action and civil disobedience produced real disruption. It overflowed attempts to continue as if nothing were happening. In that sense, we recovered that feeling and experience.

I think a recruitment process could trigger something similar. With the war, it is more complicated because Ukraine has been a very strange political turning point, and we will see what happens.

The other day, now that I am living in Madrid, I went to a demonstration. It was not as massive as those during the Iraq War, but there were still many older people.

In that sense, I am more optimistic. I think there would be opposition, because ultimately, I think that when it comes to it, not even fascists want to go to war.



Context: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in Spain

Spain ended compulsory military service on 31 December 2001, closing a conscription system in place since 1770. From the early 1970s, the insumisión movement, a large civil disobedience campaign, led growing numbers of young Spaniards to refuse both military and alternative civilian service. Hundreds were imprisoned as a result. Conscientious objection was officially recognised in a 1984 law, but the alternative service lasted 18 to 24 months, longer than the 12 months of military duty. Today, Spain has a fully professional volunteer army.

Conclusion

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading this publication and listening to the voices of conscientious objectors to military service.

They made their choices in different situations and were motivated by different reasons. Some held strong beliefs before any conflict began, while others chose to leave the military after being conscripted. Some focused on the personal impact of military service, while others spoke openly about their political, ethical, or anti-militarist views.

Any reason for refusing violence is valid, and this refusal can take many forms, such as refusing to serve in the military and engaging in peace activism. We commend those who reject militarisation and support any constructive efforts to build peace and lasting alternatives to the current war system. Those who do not want to risk their life in war deserve protection and respect. No one should lose her/his life in war.

We reject war; war should be abolished.

Conscientious objection is a human right, and those who refuse to serve in the army on grounds of conscience should not be questioned. We should celebrate their resistance and support their decision to say 'no'.

Reading these stories and picturing ourselves in the participants' shoes is an important first step to think about the topic, be aware of it, and inquire our conscience, especially if we consider the context we are living in - with an increase in military spending, militarisation of society and plans to reintroduce conscription.

We invite you to "pass along the word," share these stories in your community and during conversations, and keep the dialogue on this topic open and going.

Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA),
War Resisters' International (WRI),
Connection e.V.,
Agir pour la Paix.

What Can You Do Next?

- Take some time to think about these stories on your own. What did you learn from them? What new perspective on the issue did you get?
- Talk about this topic with others. Make room for open and honest conversations about what it's like for people who refuse military service.
- Visit the websites of Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) (**https://www.qcea.org/**), Connection e. V. (**en.connection-ev.org/**), War Resisters' International (WRI) (**www.warresisters.org/war-resisters-international/**) and Agir Pour La Paix (**https://agirpourlapaix.be/**) to find out about current campaigns and actions that support conscientious objectors.
- Look for local organisations supporting conscientious objectors to military service and join solidarity actions.
- Even if there is no military conscription in your country, there are likely conscientious objectors from other countries seeking refuge - some of whom may be unhoused or in transit. Join efforts to help these communities in your area.
- Join peace activists around the world and participate in the #RefuseWar international action at **www.refusewar.org** and make your own personal declaration of refusal of war!

Further reading

There are many great publications that explore conscientious objection in depth. Here are some of them:

- The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO). *Annual Report 2025*. Brussels, 2026.
- Goodall, Felicity. *We Will Not Go to War: Conscientious Objection During the World Wars.* Stroud: The History Press, 2010.
- Graham, John W. *Conscription and Conscience: A History 1916–1919.* London: Allen and Unwin, 1922.
- Townhead, Laurel and Brett, Rachel. *International Standards on Conscientious Objection to Military Service*. Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), 2021.
- Quakers in Britain. *A Walk in Their Shoes: Conscientious Objection Walking Tour*. London: Friends House, 2025.

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