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National service or conscription? Bolton debates

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National service or conscription? Bolton debates

'National service' is a phrase that is open to interpretation regarding its meaning. Philip Wainwright, in his thesis on the subject, argues that it was about training a reserve of men rather than creating a conscript arm along continental lines. Other forms of 'national service' also exist based on an ethos of work for the service of the community.¹ This interpretation, focussing on the period 1936-42 is very different from the years prior to the First World War, when the term meant conscription. However, despite the military authorities favouring the voluntary system, they had moved to being marginally in favour of it by September 1914, as it became apparent that a large army would be required.² Following a census of available labour resources, the Military Service Act 1916 introduced conscription despite parliamentary and trade union opposition. The latter feared the potential impact on the freedom of the working-man to choose, a fear that remained in the late 1930s.³ The workings of the act added to this, as a lack of civilian oversight caused problems when it came to dealing with matters of conscience, a lesson applied in 1939. The need for the prior organisation of labour and appropriate mechanisms for handling conscientious objectors (COs) were just two of the lessons to come out of the First World War. The conflict also expanded the term 'national service' to include non-combatants such as those undertaking humanitarian work.⁴

Interwar attitudes regarding 'national service' and conscription were ambiguous. A 1937 British Institute of Public Opinion poll indicated that Britain was three to one against the introduction of conscription.⁵ This attitude changed due to international crises during 1938: the Anschluss in March and the Munich crisis in September. At the time of the Anschluss, as Denis Hayes in *Conscription Conflict* argues, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain was reluctant even to introduce a measure of compulsory training. Chamberlain continued to hold this view despite the revelations of the

¹ P. J. Wainwright, 'The National Service Debate: The Government, Conscription and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1936-1942' (Ph.D., Stanford University, 1994).

² T. M. La Goy, 'Soldiers of Conscience: Conscription and Conscientious Objection in the United States and Britain During World War I' (Ph.D., State University of New York at Albany, 2010): 76-8.

³ R. D. S. Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime: Britain, 1918-1940, a Case Study* (London, 1962).

⁴ Wainwright, 'The National Service Debate'.

⁵ R. Broad, *Conscription in Britain, 1939-1963: The Militarization of a Generation* (London, 2006): 81-8.

Munich crisis reopening the debate about a national register and conscription.⁶ Increased public awareness of the international situation and its continuing deterioration only heightened the pressure. Following the Munich crisis, France began to apply diplomatic pressure for the introduction of conscription, as Daniel Hucker discusses in an article of the subject. Hucker argues that France applied the pressure at a time when public opinion was in favour of such a move. He goes beyond the standard argument by advocating the fusion between international and domestic pressure.⁷ The pressure increased after the German invasion of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Initially, Britain increased its military strength by announcing a double of the Territorial Army but guarantees to Poland, Romania and Greece, as well as the Italian invasion of Albania, meant that conscription became the next logical step. This argument is outlined in Hayes book, *Challenge of Conscience*,⁸ and developed fully by Peter Dennis in *Decision by Default*. Dennis shows that as British policy developed during Chamberlain's administration, conscription was necessary as not enough volunteers were coming forward.⁹ Part of Chamberlain's fears about introducing conscription related to how he perceived people would react. However, the moderate nature of the measure and the CO provisions meant that there was not a strong backlash.¹⁰

Prior to, and following the decision to introduce conscription, there was debate in the national press. *The Times* letters column in late March indicated support for such a step, whilst remaining aware of the logistical challenges. The letters also contented that compulsion would send a clear message that the country was prepared, especially as the working-man, according to Brig resident, Martin Lindsay, realised that Hitler needed stopping. The subject did not really feature in the letters column of the *Manchester Guardian* until the announcement of conscription. The letters published highlighted a number of themes: everybody should be free to choose, conscience,¹¹ objection to serving in the forces of the crown when too young to vote.¹²

⁶ D. Hayes, *Conscription Conflict: The Conflict of Ideas in the Struggle for and against Military Conscription in Britain between 1901 and 1939* (London, 1949).

⁷ D. Hucker, 'Franco-British Relations and the Question of Conscription in Britain, 1938-1939', *Contemporary European History*, 17, 4 (2008): 437-56.

⁸ Hayes, *Conscription Conflict: The Conflict of Ideas in the Struggle for and against Military Conscription in Britain between 1901 and 1939*.

⁹ P. Dennis, *Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defence, 1919-1939* (London, 1972).

¹⁰ D. Hayes and Central Board for Conscientious Objectors., *Challenge of Conscience: The Story of the Conscientious Objectors of 1939-1949* (London, 1949): 1-3.

¹¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1939.

¹² *Manchester Guardian*, 28 April 1939.

The letters provided indications of 'informed' opinion with occasional contributions from those outside of this group. Evidence from Mass Observation (M-O) provides a broader national perspective, despite not being representative of the population as a whole. The March and April directives asked about 'national service' and conscription. The free text responses, and fieldwork that took place in London indicated a willingness to serve and 'do their bit' even if there was some reluctance amongst respondents.¹³

With the national sources indicated a change in public attitudes in favour of 'national service' and conscription by April 1939, how had attitudes in Bolton developed and did they differ for the story at a 'national' level?

Prior to the Munich crisis, there was limited discussion in Bolton. During the period following the crisis, discussion focussed on the problem of recruitment. Ronald Andrew, in a letter to the *Bolton Evening News*, favoured the introduction of conscription as the voluntary system placed an unfair burden on those who were prepared to come forward.¹⁴ However, the public remained unconvinced of the necessity of the measure. The idea of a national register found greater favour, with Colonel Grierson, the chair of the Bolton Conservative Association, advocating such a step as a number of meetings.¹⁵ Even the idea of a register met with some resistance, as Reverend Dabi criticised it as 'forcing the people to do the will of the state', which smacked of Nazism.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the *Bolton Standard* summarised opinion by stating that the current moment required a register but not conscription, which is a fair summary of the evidence.¹⁷

A campaign for 'national service' and the completion of a voluntary national register began in January 1939. The *Bolton Evening News* supported the campaign despite what it saw as the inherent contradictions within it: rendering of service without persuasion and that it was the duty of all.¹⁸ The contradiction being that if it was the duty of all, then it should be compulsory. The launch of the

¹³ M-O A: DR1496, Special Report on Conscription, April 1939; M-O A: DR1075 Crises 2 - March 1939, April 1939; M-O A: DR1122 Crisis, April 1939; M-O A: DR1080 April Crisis 2, 2 May 1939.

¹⁴ *Bolton Evening News*, 12 October 1938.

¹⁵ BLHC: FDC/1/1/4, Emergency Meeting of the Council, 14 October 1938; *Bolton Evening News*, 7 November 1938.

¹⁶ *Bolton Evening News*, 8 November 1938.

¹⁷ *Bolton Standard*, 28 October 1938.

¹⁸ *Bolton Evening News*, 23 January 1939.

campaign drew comment in the letters column. 'A.B.' indicated that he was one of the younger generation that was not prepared to serve, whilst 'Y.Z.' argued that if a register was not completed then compulsion would follow, thereby reinforcing the contradiction highlighted in the 23 January editorial.¹⁹ For the most part the trade unions supported the campaign and an editorial in the *Bolton Evening News* admitted that the support of the labour movement was vital to its success.²⁰ Locally, the labour movement indicated its support when the Trades Council voted by 37 to 24 in favour, noting that compulsion would follow if the campaign failed.²¹ The Trades Council meeting was just one of the meetings that discussed 'national service'. At the end of March, a public meeting called for people to help Britain and thereby perform three vital services: making the country stronger, helping to ensure peace, and helping to convince other countries that Britain was prepared to fight. The *Bolton Evening News* noted that one of the features of these meetings was the lack of representation of those under 30, even though they were more politically conscious than in 1914. However, this absence did not mean that they were not prepared to serve, as one young man stated: 'I shall not volunteer but if there is conscription and I know that everybody is roped in then I shall do what I am called do wholeheartedly and with all the more satisfaction'.²² Whilst not possible to generalise about the attitudes of the young from this quotation, it may provide a partial explanation about this age group's lack of attendance at meetings about national service.

The *Bolton Evening News* furthered the discussion by running a four-day letters competition, which invited people to express their opinions on 'national service' and conscription. The majority of letters that appeared favoured conscription. Arthur Gregory, a resident of Hunger Hill, and 'B.A.C.', supported conscription as they realised that a certain level of training was required in order to ensure that Britain was prepared and to prevent avoiding the unpreparedness of the First World War.²³ This theme was common amongst letters sent to the paper, such as those from Frank Parr²⁴ and 'R.C.'.²⁵ In amongst all of the letters favouring the introduction of conscription was one from J. Arnold that provided an excellent summary of why conscription was required:²⁶

¹⁹ *Bolton Evening News*, 23 January 1939; *Bolton Evening News*, 24 January 1939; *Bolton Evening News*, 24 January 1939.

²⁰ *Bolton Evening News*, 20 February 1939.

²¹ *Bolton Evening News*, 16 March 1939.

²² *Bolton Evening News*, 28 March 1939; *Bolton Journal and Guardian*, 31 March 1939.

²³ *Bolton Evening News*, 30 March 1939; *Bolton Evening News*, 30 March 1939.

²⁴ *Bolton Evening News*, 31 March 1939.

²⁵ *Bolton Evening News*, 31 March 1939.

²⁶ *Bolton Evening News*, 4 April 1939.

‘Sir, - I support compulsory national service for the following reasons: -

1. I believe in the preservation of peace, law, and order, even at the expense of a little liberty.
2. I disapprove of armed aggression, and am of the opinion that compulsory national service in England will prove a powerful deterrent.
3. It will be a warning to aggressors that the survival of the fittest will be grimly true.
4. It will convert leisure (and what are probably wasted) hours into hours of usefulness.
5. It will create a fundamental feeling of responsibility for, and a pride in, one’s country.
6. It will create a state of preparedness, and will be a warning to law-breakers that we will vigorously defend our rights, our traditions, and our sense of justice.
7. It will curtail, and rightly so, I believe, the much vaunted liberty and freedom, we as British subjects ‘enjoy’. Only by curtailing this liberty can we hope to retain it for our descendants.
8. It would have the effect of showing the people of this country that the government had the present situation in hand, and would instil confidence because of it.
9. Compulsory service would ensure that each able-bodied man and woman did his or her share towards avoiding violation of principles.
10. Every man should be ready to defend for himself that which had helped England to become so great – his home life. Compulsory service will ensure it.’

Opponents of conscription also made their voices heard. H. Crook, a resident of St-Helen’s Road in Bolton, opposed conscription, as he believed that ‘press gang methods would never be tolerated by the English people in peace time, and if war came I do not think they would be necessary’.²⁷ This letter recognised the people would respond if war came. However, the most common point made by those who opposed the introduction of conscription was the removal of the freedom to choose especially as people were not inclined to do things that they were compelled to do.²⁸ The best letter making this argument came from John Merritt, a resident of Cellini Street in Bolton, who wrote to voice his objection by saying that ‘one of the proudest possessions of an Englishman is his freedom. Unlike the people of many other countries, he can do what he likes, when he likes, and how he likes. For that reason alone I am strongly against any form of compulsory service’.²⁹ The objection to the removal of choice mirrored the letters that would be published a month later in the

²⁷ *Bolton Evening News*, 30 March 1939.

²⁸ *Bolton Evening News*, 31 March 1939; *Bolton Evening News*, 31 March 1939; *Bolton Evening News*, 3 April 1939.

²⁹ *Bolton Evening News*, 30 March 1939.

Manchester Guardian, thereby flagging it as an argument that applied at both a national and a local level.

On the final day of correspondence, the *Bolton Evening News* informed readers that the postbag had been larger than ever before and it was clear that the subject was on the minds of the people.³⁰ The majority of the letters published favoured conscription, with the topics raised reflecting the wider national debate that was to occur in the *Manchester Guardian* in late April and early May. However, 'J.W.D.' challenged the conclusion that the majority were in favour arguing that many people had not spoken up as they were in reserved occupations³¹. The fact that the majority of the letters published were in favour is not surprising given the attitude of the paper towards the subject, and the welcome that it gave the introduction of conscription a few weeks later.

The *Bolton Evening News* welcomed the introduction of conscription, describing it as 'one of cruel necessity due to the military commitments that Britain had made'. The paper's support drew criticism from Tom Binks, who claimed that the paper's position betrayed its liberal origins, a criticism refuted by the editor, who argued that the decision was in the best interests of the country.³² This objection was just one incidence of opposition to conscription. For example, Bolton Labour women organised a coming of age party, which one attendee, Councillor Kettle from Westhoughton, spoke to about how conscription affected those who could not vote. She said 'they were not able to register their protest against the National Government through the ballot box, and fascism, she contended, was one step nearer by conscription'.³³ The local labour movement joined in the protest. On 2 May, the paper reported that the Plumbers Union branch secretary, J. Morris, objected to the conscription of the 20-1 age group as they learned more of their trade at this age than any other point.³⁴ Two days later, Mr Bell, President of the Weavers Association, added to union opposition by introducing an emergency resolution opposing conscription, as he believed that it would cause disunity and unrest.³⁵ A further protest came from Bolton Trades Council, where the atmosphere 'showed stronger feelings than for many years'. At the meeting J. B. O'Hara and Mr Fagan advocated withdrawal from the national service movement, an amendment that was defeated.

³⁰ *Bolton Evening News*, 4 April 1939.

³¹ *Bolton Evening News*, 6 April 1939.

³² *Bolton Evening News*, 1 May 1939.

³³ *Bolton Evening News*, 3 May 1939.

³⁴ *Bolton Evening News*, 1 May 1939.

³⁵ *Bolton Evening News*, 2 May 1939.

O'Hara continued by urging the Labour Party to register a protest, though the problem here was that divisions of opinion existed within Bolton Labour Party.³⁶ The discussion was complicated as those who opposed conscription had been amongst the foremost advocates of the need of combat Nazism. This did not prevent them passing a resolution against conscription.³⁷ O'Hara acknowledged this contradiction in a letter to the *Bolton Evening News* on 6 May but still opposed the measure, as he did not believe it was for the purposes stated.³⁸

The focus of this paper has been on the eight-week period between the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and the middle of May. The German invasion reignited the debate about 'national service' and conscription at a national and local level, a debate that had been simmering along, resulting from the voluntary 'national service' campaign. Prior to the launch of this campaign, the subject had generated very little interest in Bolton, except for a brief period following the Munich crisis. The reigniting of the debate in Bolton fell primarily to the *Bolton Evening News*, who used its editorial and letters columns to encourage debate. The arguments put forward by correspondents in the letters column mirrored many of the points raised in national newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*. These included the need to be prepared, to send a clear signal that Britain would be prepared to fight, and that the introduction of conscription would remove an individual's right to choose. The emergence of these themes in the *Bolton Evening News* came between their emergence in *The Times* and *Manchester Guardian* letters columns respectively. The arguments also tie in with comments made to Mass Observation. The local debates on the subject are therefore timely, when take as part of the national context. They demonstrate a degree of convergence between national and local expressions of opinion.

The local expressions of opinion indicate a clear support for the voluntary service campaign, as 'informed' local opinion realised that compulsion would follow if it failed. The letter writers to the *Bolton Evening News* during their four-day letter competition on the subject showed a majority in favour of compulsion, if only to ensure that the country was prepared unlike prior to the First World War. Given the editorial attitudes on the subject, it is no surprise that the majority of the published letters took this point of view. However, in keeping with the nature of local newspapers and their

³⁶ *Bolton Evening News*, 4 May 1939.

³⁷ *Bolton Evening News*, 4 May 1939; *Bolton Journal and Guardian*, 5 May 1939.

³⁸ *Bolton Evening News*, 6 May 1939.

need, to reflect the views of the community that they serve as a whole, the views of opponents were also printed.

Overall, two things can be concluded. Firstly, that the subject of 'national service' and conscription was of interest at both a national and local level, and that secondly, the *Bolton Evening News* provide an excellent example of a local newspaper that reflected the views of the community that it served.

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