



British Military Service Tribunals, 1916-18

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Military Service Tribunals were formed following the introduction of conscription in January 1916, to consider applications for exemption from men deemed by the new legislation to have enlisted. Swiftly, they gained two opposing yet equally unflattering reputations. In the eyes of the military, they were soft, obstructionist 'old duffers'. To most of the men who came before them, they were the unfeeling civilian arm of a remorseless grinding machine.

This work, utilizing a rare surviving set of Tribunal records, challenges both perspectives. The Tribunals were charged with balancing the needs of the army with those of the localities from which their members were drawn; they received instructions, recommendations and polite guidance from their masters at Whitehall, yet each was in effect a sovereign body whose decisions could not be overturned other than by appeal to similar bodies. Wielding unprecedented power yet acutely sensitive to the contradictions inherent in their task, they were obliged, often at a conveyor belt's pace, to make decisions that often determined the fate of men, their families, and ultimately, their communities. That some of these decisions were capricious or even wrong is indisputable; the sparse historiography of the Tribunals has too often focused upon the idiosyncratic example while ignoring the wider, adverse impact of imprecise legislation, government hand-washing and short-term military exigencies. Evaluating in depth that impact, and illuminating the social dynamics that often marked proceedings in the Tribunal chamber, this study attempts to redress the balance of an enduringly damning historical judgment.

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