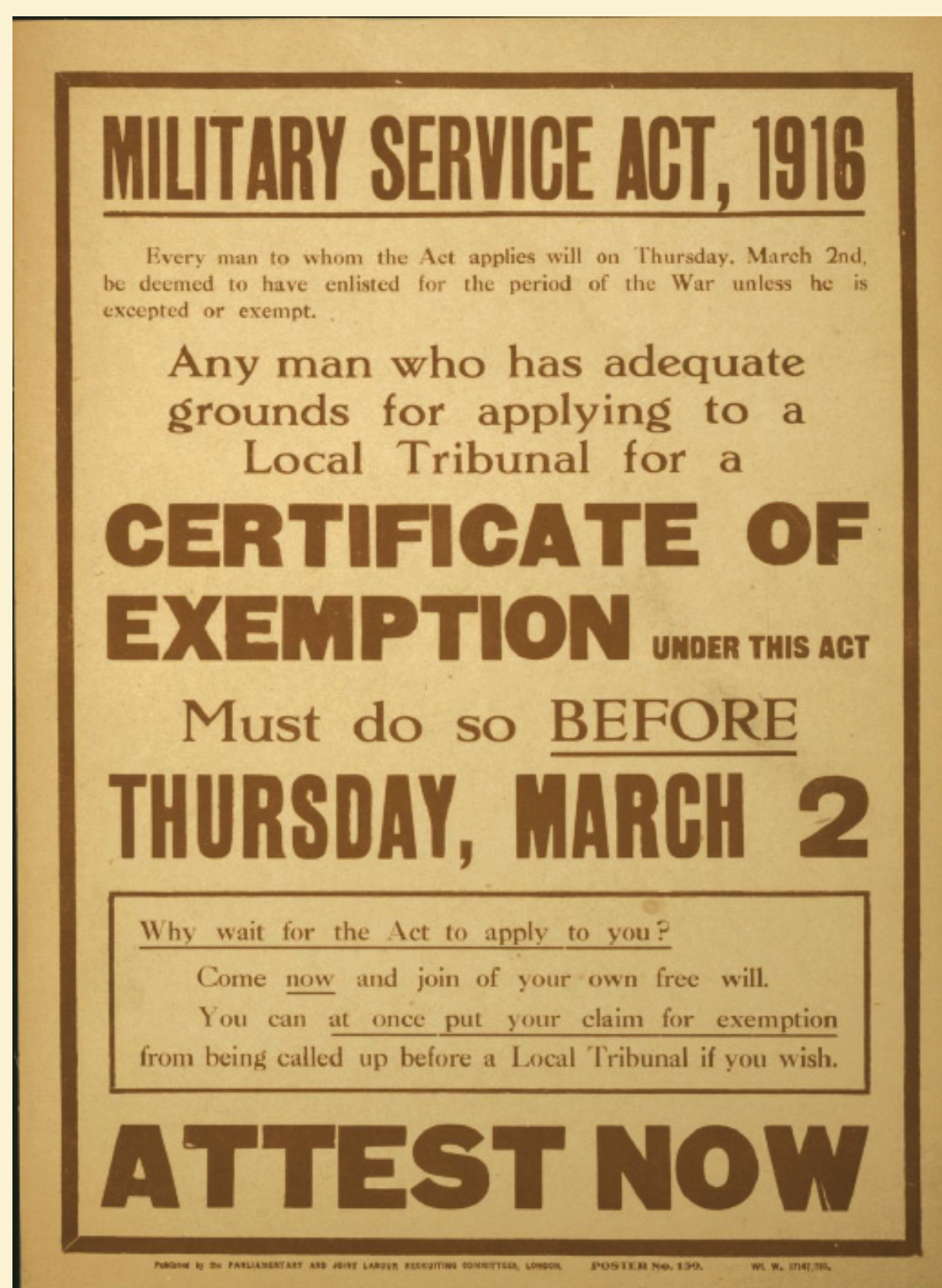


# Conscientious Objection

**By January 1915, over a million men had enlisted voluntarily in the Army. A year later, the catastrophic casualty rate forced the Government to pass the Military Service Act 1916 which introduced conscription for the first time in British history. Most men aged between 18 and 41 were liable to be called up.**

Britain was the first country in Europe to establish a right to conscientious objection. Germany did not do so until 1949 and France until 1963.



The Act allowed for six types of exemption to military service and applicants for exemption were required to make their case before a Military Tribunal. One of these exemptions was ‘on the ground of conscientious objection to the undertaking of combat and service’. During WW1 more than 16,000 men refused military service on grounds of conscience.

Some COs refused to fight because of their Socialist principles, others because of their uncompromising Christian faith as expressed by Dr. Alfred Salter:

*‘Look! Christ in khaki, out in France, thrusting his bayonet into the body of a German workman. See! The Son of God with a machine gun, ambushing a column of German infantry, catching them unawares in a lane and mowing them down in their helplessness. No! No! That picture is an impossible one, and we all know it. That settles the matter for me. I cannot uphold the war.’*

*(Labour Leader 24th September 1914)*

Conscientious Objectors fell into three categories:

1. **Non-Combatants:** served in a supporting role, for example as stretcher-bearers or labourers. They wore uniform and were under military orders.
2. **Alternativists:** undertook civilian ‘work of national importance’ not under military command.
3. **Absolutists:** refused even non-combatant duties believing that such service indirectly supported the war. They were sentenced to prison terms with hard labour. Conditions were so harsh that 81 died. After the war many employers refused to take on COs so they suffered continuing financial hardship because of their stance.

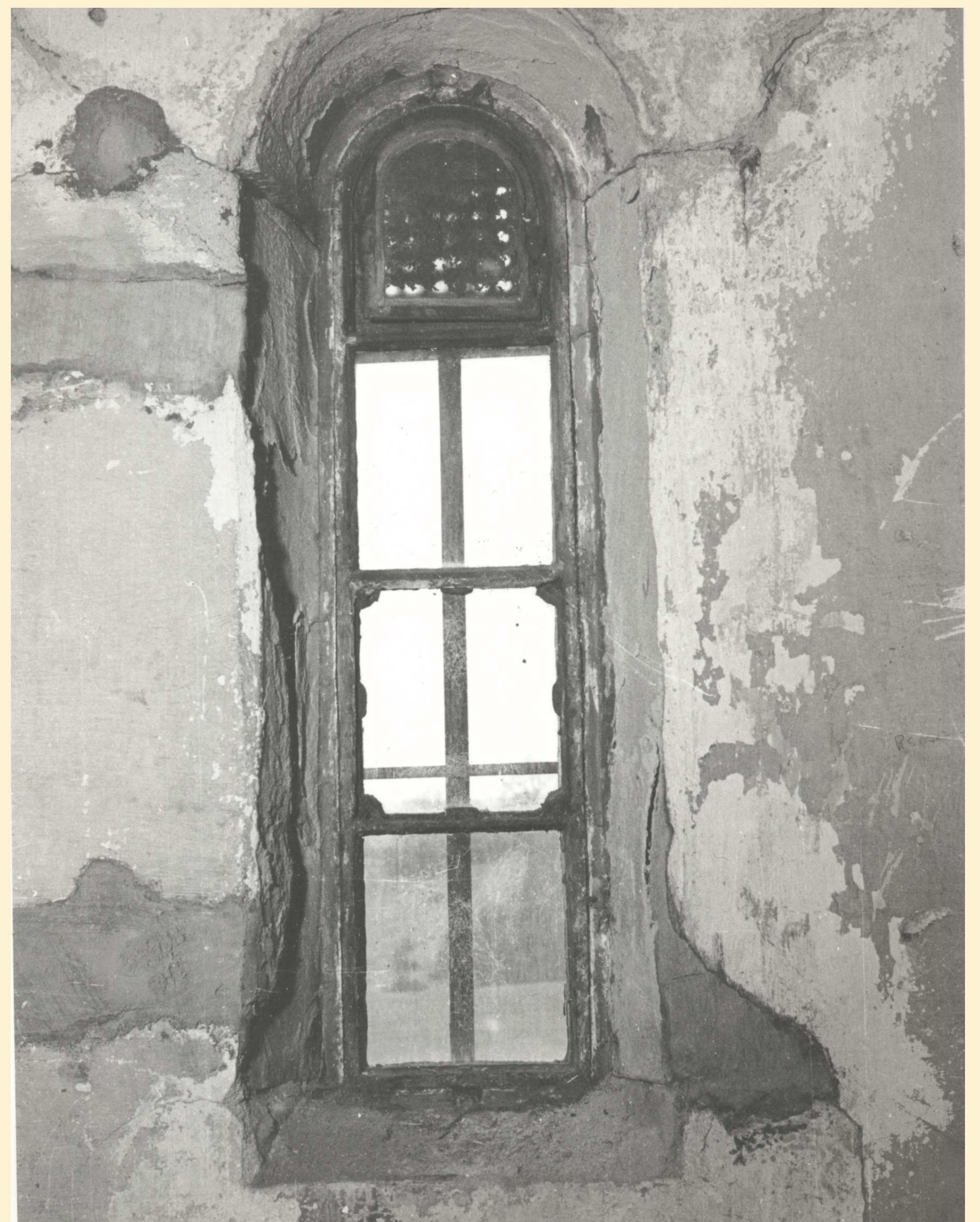


Photo: Northern Friends Peace Board

Window of a cell in Richmond Castle, one of the prisons where ‘absolutist’ COs were held.

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