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Hell No! We Won't Go! Resistance to Conscription in Post War Australia

By Bobbie Oliver

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Reviewed by Alexandra Pierce

The history of national service, or conscription, in Australia is a puzzle with many pieces, from the Citizen Military Force (CMF) before World War I and the anti-conscription referendums of that war to the extension of where such men could serve, allowing CMF members to be sent to, for example, Papua New Guinea in World War II. The focus of Bobbie Oliver's book is on the National Service Act 1951 and then the amended Act of 1964. In particular, she focuses on the ways in which young men were able to *not* participate, and their reasons for that.

The first 40 or so pages deal with the 1950s. Between 1951 and 1959 the Menzies government insisted that 'global war was an imminent threat' (p. 11) so compulsory military training for young men was necessary. Young men had to complete '176 days of training … within five years of enlistment' (p. 12) at the age of 17. In this period, Oliver says there were 3679 applicants for full or partial exemption from service—either complete exemption from the Act, or to be a non-combatant. Many of these young men had theological reasons, such as being Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh Day Adventists; most applied to be Conscientious Objectors (CO), as the Act allowed. The two chapters on this period explore some of the experiences of these young men in applying for CO status, particularly around the difficulty of convincing magistrates of their sincerity.

The majority of the book is, unsurprisingly, focused on 1965–1972, when national servicemen were called up by the 'birthday ballot' and many were sent to the Vietnam War. Oliver explores the ways in which men chose not to participate in the National Service Act, such as the difference between not registering in the first place, or registering but refusing to comply with further demands (e.g. attendance at a medical exam). She points out that as time went on there were increasingly calls for 'wrecking' the Act, not just personal refusals to be involved: people 'filling in a falsy' (completing false registration forms), for instance, as well as illegally handing out information about non-compliance. Oliver explores the motivations of the men who were involved, showing that they included those who would have been accepted as COs because of their religious beliefs, as well as those who opposed this particular war and those who objected to the method used to choose the men who would serve.

These topics have been covered elsewhere, although rarely in such detail. Oliver interviewed and wrote to many of the men involved, and includes their personal reflections. What I particularly found intriguing, and sad, was the exploration of how being either in jail or 'underground' (on the run as a draft resister, for more than two years in some cases) had an impact on the men involved. I appreciated the comprehensive nature of Oliver's research and the story she presents.

I have three quibbles with this book. First, Oliver discusses the difference in fines some men received—$5 or $30 for the same offense, for example—but with no indication of what those numbers actually meant in the late 1960s. Was $5 a good meal, or half a day's pay? Second, the book isn't entirely representative of Australia as a whole—there's little discussion about men in Queensland, for instance, and there's no discussion about why this gap exists. Was she unable to find men willing to speak to her, for instance? That would be fine; I'd just like to know about it. Finally, on a similar topic, Oliver doesn't discuss her methodology. How did she find these men? Did she contact many more, only to be ignored, or have many of them died? A comment on this issue would have helped place the men she does feature in the book in their broader context.

Overall, this is a well-written book: it's easy to read, the structure of the chapters make sense, and the inclusion of personal reflections makes it feel very immediate. The text is accompanied by a fascinating range of contemporary photographs, mostly from the protests around Australia against both the war and conscription. This is a particularly valuable resource for History teachers at Year 11 and 12 who include the Vietnam War in their curriculum.