

# In Exile

*Jussi Hermaja (25) is a student and peace activist from Jyväskylä, Finland, who has been given a 197 days prison sentence for conscientious objection. Jussi fled to Belgium in October 2001 and started the process of seeking political asylum. He believes that the Finnish conscientious objectors are subject to political discrimination. Jussi does not intend to return to Finland voluntarily.*

Jussi justifies his conscientious objection by pointing out the flaws in the Finnish alternative service system, and the principle of equality enshrined in the UN's Human Rights Declaration. In his opinion the Finnish non-military service is not an equal alternative to the military service. The purpose of the alternative service seems to be punishment of the non-military servicemen rather than community service that supports peace.

Jussi refers to the total duration of the non-military service (13 months), which is over twice as long as the most common military service (6 months) and over one and a half times longer than the average military service (8 months). Besides the duration, Jussi also criticises the other flaws in the non-military service system.

Each year there are more applicants for the non-military service than there are posts for them to serve in. The law regarding the rights of the non-military servicemen in their service places is not respected, and is not enforced by any means, especially with regards to economic issues. Also, non-military service is not introduced as an equal alternative to the military service in the general draft. The alternative form of service is not necessarily even mentioned in the enrollment events. Choosing the non-military service does not exclude a person from, military service (including armed service) during war time, Jussi comments. Jussi thinks that the Finnish obligatory service system does not treat the different groups of conscientious objectors equally: Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from service because of their religious conviction. One might ask why the pacifistic conviction of one group is acknowledged but the members of different groups are put in prison. Jussi also refers to women and the citizens of Åland (an autonomous island, which is officially part of Finland), who are also exempt from the military service.

The Finnish service system categorises people into those obliged to carry out the service and those who are exempt often on an irrational basis that has little to do with the principles of equality. If the obligatory service is seen as a duty of every citizen, it should apply to everyone regardless of their sex, religion or the place they live.

Jussi's opinions receive international support. The UN's Human Rights Committee stated in 1998 that the Finnish legislation discriminates against other conscientious objectors compared to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The European Parliament stated in 1994 that the duration of the non-military service should not be longer than the military service. The highly regarded human rights organisation Amnesty International has already adopted over 40 Finnish conscientious objectors as prisoners of conscience because it objects to the Finnish non-military service system is a punishment. Amnesty International has stated that it will immediately adopt Jussi as a prisoner of conscience if he is imprisoned in Finland.



## Into the heart of Europe

*The ignoble status as the only country in the European Union that has prisoners of conscience has not yet bothered the Finnish Parliament enough for it to make any changes to the non-military service legislature. "Case Hermaja" increases the international pressure.*

After a number of failed attempts to renovate the Finnish non-military service legislation during the last few years, more international pressure has to be targeted towards the Finnish parliament. Jussi's flight to Belgium takes the human rights situation of the Finnish conscientious objectors into the heart of Europe. At the same time, Jussi's case is related to the criticism of the increasing militarisation of the European Union. The EU is turning into a militaristic force by creating its own intervention units. Finland is also taking part in this process. By putting resources into resolving conflict by military means, the roots of these conflicts in social and economical inequality are ignored.

Armies are joining forces and becoming more international. Conscientious objection is no longer only a national issue. Jussi is paving the way towards "European conscientious objection". Jussi's petition for asylum is being processed. The Bureau for Foreigners Affairs and The Refugee Committee have given a negative response. Jussi is not going to end his struggle, but intends to take the case to the supreme administrative court (Raad Van Staat). The process may take years before it is resolved. During this time Jussi is working as a volunteer with *For Mother Earth* a peace organisation.

You can support Jussi's struggle, for example, by spreading the word (perhaps using this flyer, which you can obtain from the campaign's web pages).

You can also donate money to the Union of Conscientious Objectors Finland's account: Leonia-bank 800017-750541 (with the note "Hermaja-campaign") or to the Belgian account of For Mother Earth: Fortis-bank 001-2055174-14 (mentioning "Case Hermaja").

The campaign requires funds for communication between Finland and Belgium, and producing publicity materials.

Jussi is not able to cover the expenses of his campaign because all financial support has been denied to him by Belgium, and his livelihood is totally dependant on different kinds of donations.

The asylum process is being followed on the web pages of "Case Hermaja" [www.hermaja.org](http://www.hermaja.org) which also contains more in-depth information about the reasons behind Jussi's decision to become a conscientious objector and about the situation of the Finnish conscientious objectors.

**<http://www.hermaja.org>**

## Open Letter to Madame President of Finland

I am writing this letter in Belgium where I have had to exile due to the circumstances [in Finland]. The circumstances that the State of Finland has created with its legislation and political lines have forced me to seek political asylum.

The system of compulsory military service in Finland puts conscripts into highly unequal positions: Those young people who - for to reasons of conscience - wish to serve their country in a peaceful nonmilitary service are punished with a longer term of service. The term of non-military service is 13 months while the term of the most general military service is 6 months.

Even at this very moment numerous young men are in Finnish prisons sentenced for total objection. Most of them have refused to do non-military service exactly because of its punishment like nature. Are these pacifists imprisoned because of their opinions really a threat to our society?

Amnesty International has since 1999 adopted tens of Finnish total objectors as prisoners of opinion. Finland has the rather questionable honour to be the only country in the European Union in which, according to Amnesty International, there are prisoners of opinion.

Despite the punishment like nature of the length of non-military service, the amount of young people choosing "peace service" is strongly increasing. Partly because of this increase the present non-military service cannot fulfill its legal obligations anymore. The first to suffer the consequences are conscientious objectors.

The amount of non-military service posts available is every year less than the amount of applicants. Only a third of [non-military service] employers take care of the housing expenses of conscientious objectors as required by law (Report of the Ministry of Labour, year 2000). Often conscientious objectors are forced to pay housing expenses themselves in order to get the service post.

In my opinion, it is incomprehensible that violations of the right for free housing for conscientious objectors - a right protected by legislation - has become normal practice. What makes this even more incomprehensible is the fact that almost all conscientious objectors work at the public sector and are employed by the state or regional districts.

The simple solution to this situation, in my opinion, is the following: transfer housing expenses of conscientious objectors under charge of the state. In doing so the amount of service posts would increase as well. Another way of getting more service posts would be to let conscientious objectors do their service abroad, for example in development co-operation.

According to the current legislation, conscientious objectors are released from military service only during times of peace. In my opinion, limiting the right to total objection only to times of peace is ethically punishable. Due to the current situation we can only guess how the state would treat conscientious objectors during a possible crisis.

Extending the right to object to military service would, in my opinion, add the self evident fact to legislation that untrained men should not be used for military purposes during times of crisis. The same opinion was presented by Professor Jukka Kekkonen in 1999 in his report regarding the necessity of developing non-military service.

You have been named more than once in the press the human rights president. In addition, You have pointed out that You would like to be a Finnish opinion leader while serving as president. Therefore, I ask You what is your opinion on the length of the term of non-military service? What do You think about the practise of service posts to evade their responsibilities and to weaken the economic situation of conscious objectors?

Until now You have not used the legal right to grant amnesty to total objectors. Therefore, I ask You whether it should be understood that You consider the state to have the right to imprison people because of their political opinions?

I would like to hear Your personal views also more generally in public about the development trends of non-military service.

Yours faithfully,

*Jussi Hermaja* Belgium, 15 November 2001

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Case Hermaja:  
For Mother Earth  
Maria Hendrikaplein 5  
9000 Gent, Belgium

Tel: +32 9 242 87 52  
jussi@hermaja.org  
<http://www.hermaja.org>

# “Case Hermaja”



## Finnish Pacifist in Exile

Union of Conscientious Objectors, Finland

For Mother Earth, Belgium

[www.hermaja.org](http://www.hermaja.org)