
“We cannot yield, we cannot compromise”: The Experiences of Pennsylvanian and Other American Conscientious Objectors during World War I

Author(s): Anne M. Yoder

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The Experiences of Pennsylvanian and Other



A police band accompanies a group of Philadelphia draftees down Market Street as they march toward the train to Camp Meade. Philadelphia War Photograph Committee Collection.

cannot compromise”:

American Conscientious Objectors during World War I

BY ANNE M. YODER



Immediately following the United States' entry into the war raging in Europe in April 1917, an outstanding effort went into conscripting men into the armed forces and setting up training camps. Congress passed a selective service act on May 18, requiring all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register with local draft boards. The lion's share of the country's populace was stirred into a patriotic fervor, where all were called upon to support the war effort, and dissent was anything but prized. This majority rule, however, could not still the conscientious scruples rising up in many for whom objection to war and militarism was witness to their most deeply held beliefs. Some had been shaped by religious teaching, some by moral standards,



David H. Gehman, Questionnaire for Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in World War I (excerpt)

David H. Gehman was a 24-year-old mill foreman from Bally, Pennsylvania, when he was drafted. In 1948 he supplied this letter as part of his response to the Mennonite Research Council's survey of Mennonite C.O.s in World War I.

It was Sept. 6, 1918 that I was drafted for military service in the United States Army. . . . In those days, there was very little teaching on non-resistance. . . . My brothers received helpful Scripture references which they gave me to take along. . . .

When I left for the station, my father stood beside the table in the living room with one hand on the table and the other on my shoulders crying . . . putting his head against mine and saying that he couldn't come to see me anymore but I could come to him meaning that this would cause his death. Ever since this, whenever I think of my father, I see him standing in this position just as I left home.

Then I left for Birdsboro with my brothers. There was a huge crowd at the station which was a sight I could never forget. There was crying, praying, confusion, and laughing by those who wanted to break the monotony. There were many girls lifted up to the train windows to give one more kiss to their lovers. After the train had started a comedian came through trying to cheer us by cracking jokes but there was no laughing at this time.

After reaching Camp Dix, New Jersey . . . the objectors were drafted right into the regular army so I was among the soldiers. Very soon I went to the Sargent stating that I was an objector and that I could not take the uniform. I had tried to see him privately but when he heard this he put up his arms and yelled at the top of his voice "Hey boys, Here's a yellow streak". At this time they called me dirty names and said very mean things. . . .

. . . The test of the uniform came . . . the Sargent came up the line and asked if there were any yellow streaks in the crowd. I stepped out. The Sargent then said, "Any more yellow streaks?" then another one stepped out . . . The Sargent asked him if his preacher didn't say he could do something in the army and he said "Yes". He was ordered back into the line. Following him another fellow stepped out which was an I. B. S. A. (International Bible Student of America.) He was asked what he could do. He said he could do some service outside the military establishment but would not accept the uniform. So we two together faced the line of about three to four hundred men. The Sargent started to make fun of us in many ways right here in public. Nothing was too dirty for him to say. . . . Now the punishment came for objecting to the uniform. We had to carry large garbage cans filled with kitchen slop . . . for about the distance of four city blocks,

for one day and a half. . . . Toward the end our hands were so sore we could hardly make many more steps. . . .

We were then asked to dig post holes around a hole with an embankment and these post holes were half way up the embankment. Because it was raining the sandy ground was very slippery so we had to dig on our knees in the rain while they stood around and laughed at us and threatened to bury us alive in the holes. . . .

At another time a few soldiers making fists in our faces and told us if they had us out back some where they would kill us, and they said they sure would like to do it, but here we dare not. We just looked at them and said nothing.

Another time two school teachers asked to speak with me. This was my hardest test because they were well educated and tried to persuade me in a gentle way. They said fighting was necessary because it was a different war. I told them all about my father and the things he told me. Then they seemed to understand.

One time the Captain asked me to accompany him to his tent. I picked up weeds around his tent and shined his leather leggings to pass away the time. I think his main object of this was to protect me from the mob. It was at this time I received the letter from home stating that my father had passed on. The Sargent told me if I would accept the uniform he would permit me to return home for my father's funeral tomorrow. I told him to let happen what will but I would never accept the uniform. I gave him my experience of how my father stood at the table and begged me to stay steadfast in the Scriptures. I also told him if I would come home with a uniform and he were still living it would break his heart. After hearing this he left without a word.

Around this period about half of the uniformed men who had stood in line when we were ridiculed came to us in private and tapped us on the shoulder and said that we should not think that they ridiculed us and they were ashamed to stand where they stood. They also said that we were right and should stick to it and they were wrong This gave us courage! . . . ■

World War I Conscientious Objector Questionnaires, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, IN, available online via Goshen Plowshares Collection.

some by an aversion to violence, some by social movements, some by a belief that the government could not dictate a person's conscience, and some by a mixture of all of these. For the past three years, stories of conscientious objectors to the war in Europe, particularly in England, had made their way overseas, bolstering the convictions of American pacifists. Now these convictions would be put to the test.

From its earliest days, Pennsylvania had nurtured large numbers of individuals who objected to war. William Penn founded the commonwealth as a haven for religious dissenters, including large numbers of Quakers, who opposed violence. Pennsylvania became the first home in America not just for the Society of Friends but for other historic peace churches such as the Mennonites and the Amish, as well as the Dunkards (Church of the Brethren). Continuing immigration from Europe brought with it more religious pacifists as well as more political dissenters, many fleeing military conscription in their home countries. Between the Civil War and World War I, as the United States grew to occupy a new position in the world and saw massive political, economic, and demographic changes, many Americans became involved in efforts to promote woman suffrage and workers' rights, to create international networks around humanitarian causes, and to support arbitration standards and a peaceful community of nations. Dozens of peace societies, some boasting many thousands of members, were established worldwide. Moreover, the Socialist Party, which criticized military conflict as the tool of capitalism and imperialism, also gained strength in the early part of the 20th century. Conscientious objectors grew up in this milieu, although many were isolated in small farming communities.

It was a great shock to peace advocates when war broke out in Europe in 1914. Well-known public figures such as Jane Addams, of the Hull-House settlement in Chicago, and Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation*, among many others, rallied support for ending the war. Some were intent on keeping America out of it and established "anti-preparedness" organizations to protest against the ramp-up to militarization. When the United States joined the war in 1917, reactions among antiwar dissenters were mixed. Some continued to denounce the war or organized strikes to disrupt military industry. Many put their efforts into helping the people of war-torn Europe, not by bearing arms, but by organizing humanitarian relief efforts. (The American Friends Service Committee, founded in Philadelphia in 1917, quickly recruited a unit that trained at Haverford College before shipping off to serve alongside the Red Cross in France. Similarly, the Mennonite Relief Committee for War Sufferers was founded in 1917 to provide relief to European and Middle Eastern refugees.) Some, however, refused to participate in the war effort in any capacity.

About 6,000 men are known to have registered as conscientious objectors (C.O.s), though there were likely more. Their ranks included members of the historic peace churches, such as sectarians as Russellites (later called Jehovah's Witnesses) and Seventh-Day Adventists, highly educated men (college students, graduates, and professors), men with little schooling, laborers, Socialists, members of the International Workers of the World (IWW), and radicals of various kinds. They were interviewed by local draft boards alongside other armed forces recruits. If their draft board was sympathetic to their beliefs, C.O.s could occasionally be deferred immediately for farm labor or other

(ОПРОВИТЕ) Philadelphia draftees, likely departing for Camp Meade, Maryland, or Camp Dix, New Jersey; **(БОТТОМ LEFT)** Members of the American Friends Service Committee in Europe during the war. Philadelphia War Photograph Committee Collection. **(БОТТОМ RIGHT)** Group of four C.O.s, likely at Camp Meade. Left: Morris Trasken; top: John Bertolet; center: William Kantor (all from Philadelphia); right: Harry Clave (from Shamokin, Pennsylvania). William Kantor Collected Papers (CDG-A), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.





(LEFT) “Lined up on Saw Horse” at Camp Meade. Photo includes Fred Gerhart and Burdtt Stine (both from Reading) and Leroy Horlacher (from Philadelphia); (RIGHT) “Four in a Row. Old Mennonites” at Camp Meade, including Amandus Reeb (from Philadelphia), John Ward (from Souderton), and David Derstine (from Telford). William Kantor Collected Papers (CDG-A), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

nonmilitary work. From Franconia Mennonite Conference, a network of churches in eastern Pennsylvania, only 16 of the 350 of its men drafted at one point were actually sent to military camps; the rest were likely given farm deferments. For the most part, though, C.O.s who expressed their convictions to these boards were ignored and made to report to the army camps like all other enlisted men. As there was no camp in Pennsylvania, most men from the commonwealth were sent to Camp Meade in Maryland.

The experiences of conscientious objectors varied according to their level of cooperation with the military, as well as which camp they were in. Most C.O.s were offered noncombatant work in the Medical, Engineering, and Quartermasters’ Corps, and the majority—some 4,000 in all—accepted. Those who did not were either absolutists, determined to not cooperate in any way with the “military machine,” as they called it, or were men who were uneasy about how far they could cooperate without compromising their consciences. As prominent Socialist Norman Thomas later explained it, “things that men would gladly have done as gentlemen to help in the common life of the camp they could not do when obedience to any military order was interpreted as a sign of submission.” As a result, “a course of action which objectors had pictured to themselves as unflinching testimony to their dearest beliefs often degenerated into a long wrangle with officers on potato paring or saluting.” Because President Wilson and the War Department delayed until March 1918 in outlining exactly what noncombatant service entailed and how conscientious objectors were to be treated, much was left to private interpretation. C.O.s could be court-martialed and sent to prison for not obeying orders, for demonstrating a “sullen and defiant” attitude, for being questionably sincere in their convictions, or for being active in propaganda (an offense which, widely interpreted, could include reading a German newspaper).

During this time many camp commanders and prison directors seemed to have made up their own rules and often did everything they could to show their distaste for C.O.s. Cleason Forry of Hanover, Pennsylvania, wrote in his brief memoir that when “the Captain asked me why I refused to wear the uniform, I answered, ‘I can’t take any part

in the war.’ . . . When I refused to sign for army duty he questioned me about my religion and cursed me and called me yellow, a coward and a slacker.” In his diary entry for February 12, 1918, during a hunger strike to protest conditions for C.O.s, David Eichel recorded: “Brig[adier] Gen[eral] Johnson informed us that he doesn’t care about us, never thinks of us, except when we annoy him. . . . Doesn’t care if we starve. Would allow us to starve until collapse and then feed us forcibly. Told us that if some soldiers killed us they would be justified.”

Some were determined to break the C.O.s of their convictions, or at least get them to agree to noncombatant service. Enlisted men often took this hazing into their own hands, handing out beatings, soaking C.O.s with water hoses, hanging them by their necks over tree branches and railings or head-down into cesspits, and ordering them to stand at attention in extreme heat or cold for many hours, among other punishments. C.O.s were also subjected to arguments from military personnel and visitors to the camps and prisons about their antiwar stance. In his memoir, William Marx Kantor, a Socialist from Philadelphia who later became a Quaker, recalled being interviewed by an army psychiatrist who “tried to give me the customary ‘line’ about why I should be proud to die for my country. Before I got through with him, he was a very enlightened man and discomfited too. He asked me what my objection was to wearing the U.S. uniform, and I promptly informed him that it was an insignia of murder; any man wearing that uniform was regarded as a potential killer and that I had been taught that murder was a capital offense.”

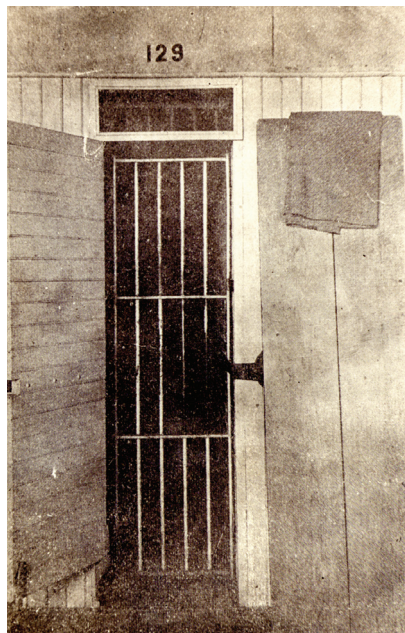
Eventually camp commanders found the absolutist C.O.s—those who would not comply with any military order and who had not yet been sentenced to prison—too troublesome to keep in their camps. One such absolutist was Jacob Rose, a Jewish Socialist and member of the Humano-Vegetarian Society from Philadelphia. Only 4’10” in height and weighing less than 100 pounds, he would undoubtedly have been judged unfit for military service if he had not been a C.O. Nonetheless, he was remarkable enough to often appear in the writings of other C.O.s because of the harassment he experienced for his extreme stances—he was dragged by a rope for half a mile

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through the snow for refusing to be inoculated, for instance—and for the hunger strikes he underwent.

In response to the camp commanders' requests, a Board of Inquiry was established to interview the absolutist C.O.s about their "sincerity." Out of this, some were offered farm furloughs or the opportunity to go to Europe to do reconstruction work. The rest were told to appear for courts-martial hearings, where they were grilled about their beliefs and actions from when they were boys through to adulthood and then sentenced to between five and 25 years of prison. Given that many of these men were farmers or laborers with only a few years of schooling, it was often easy for interrogators to pounce on supposed holes in their testimony. Paul Burkholder, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, recalled the ordeal he went through in his interview at Camp Meade: "Here I was, seated on a camp chair, and these men around me in a semi-circle, and this judge would ask you a sharp question that you never heard before, and he didn't any more than have it out of his lips until the major would snap his finger and say, 'What's the matter, Burkholder, why don't you answer the Judge?' Sharp. And he kept this up until he got me in a position that I couldn't scarcely talk, my voice trembled." Better-educated C.O.s, or those with more experience discussing the war, were sometimes able to defend themselves with aplomb, although it generally made no difference in the end. Maurice Hess, a Dunkard from Mount Alto, Pennsylvania, knew perfectly well what the outcome of his trial would be when he told his judges: "I do not believe that I am seeking martyrdom. As a young man, life and its hopes and freedom and opportunities for service are sweet to me." He explained his conviction, rooted in his faith and its principle of nonresistance, that "we would indeed be hypocrites and base traitors to our profession if we would be unwilling to bear the taunts and jeers of a sinful world, and its imprisonment, and torture or death, rather than to participate in war and military service. . . . We cannot yield, we cannot compromise, we must suffer."

About 450 absolutist C.O.s were in the end sentenced to federal prisons at Alcatraz Island, California; Fort Jay on Governor's Island, New York; and the Fort Leavenworth US Disciplinary Barracks in Kansas, where some continued to carry out their values by refusing forced labor, resulting in long bouts of solitary confinement in dark, cold cells on a bread and water diet. Even worse was the manacling that took place at Alcatraz and elsewhere,



in which prisoners were shackled to the doors of their underground cells so that their arms were held above their heads for nine hours a day, with only their toes touching the damp floor. News of this practice was smuggled out by C.O.s and was brought to the attention of President Wilson, who in December 1918 prohibited shackling for all federal prisoners. The majority of C.O.s in prison were eventually transferred to Fort Douglas, Utah, and held there. Some C.O.s ultimately compromised to secure release, or were set free by May 1919 through a presidential amnesty. Some of the most recalcitrant C.O.s—or the most uncompromising in how they lived out their convictions—were kept in prison until 1920.

In a letter to the editor of a Philadelphia newspaper, Captain E. S. Corson wrote: "If the history of conscientious objectors during the World War could be written it would constitute one of the most nondescript documents extant." Those who wish to uphold civil liberties and religious freedom will beg to differ with this viewpoint. The history and legacy of conscientious objection to war is very important. Conscientious objectors, including hundreds of Pennsylvanians, have made a significant contribution, throughout the life of this nation, in courageously affirming the preciousness of human life, as well as in being pioneers for conflict resolution, and for social justice here and abroad. They have raised important issues about citizenship and civil liberties. They have been instrumental in making sure that there is a place for dissent from majority opinion in our country, which is an important gift to a free society. Antiwar dissent and concern for civil liberties

during World War I inspired the creation of several organizations dedicated to defending individuals' rights, including the National Civil Liberties Bureau, now known as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In an interview given when he was 96 years old, ACLU founder Roger Baldwin stated: "If you say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other,' it is a very important social force. Great human history has been written by people who would not be moved." ■

Anne M. Yoder lives in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. She has been the Archivist for the Swarthmore College Peace Collection for 21 years. Her Mennonite ancestors were C.O.s, and she has spent years of her professional life processing C.O. collections at the SCPC and developing resources to highlight them, among many other tasks.

(ABOVE) "Solitary, 7th Wing Sub-basement" at Fort Leavenworth. William Kantor Collected Papers (CDG-A), Swarthmore College Peace Collection.