



# The Reporter for Conscience' Sake

The Center on  
Conscience & War

*Working to extend and defend the rights of Conscientious Objectors to war since 1940*

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## American Conscientious Objection During World War One

by Anne M. Yoder, Archivist, Swarthmore College Peace Collection

**Conscientious objection in the US is rooted in immigration** patterns through the centuries. Many religious groups came here to live out their principles without reprisals. Invited to Pennsylvania by William Penn with the promise that they would never have to bear arms, thousands of immigrants from Anabaptist groups began arriving in the 1630s. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mennonites, and others from Russia who had been given the choice, chose exile over military service. To them, America represented freedom, where there would be no punishments if they did not go to war. They were joined by others from various countries, such as the British Quakers, who also held peace and nonresistance dear.

Europe became engulfed in World War One in 1914 and, with the promise to “make the world safe for democracy,” the United States officially joined on April 6, 1917. Protestors to the war rose up from a wide swath of American society, from the educated to those with little schooling; from the professions to farmers and laborers. A large portion of dissenters were from the historic peace churches, namely Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, Dunkards, Quakers, and Amish. But hundreds of conscientious objectors (COs) came from other Protestant denominations, too, including Christadelphians, Russellites (later called Jehovah’s Witnesses), Seventh Day Adventists and others. Some COs were not religious, and made their claim from political or humanitarian convictions, such as the Socialists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies).

Some resisted even registering for the draft. William Jasmagy, a Lutheran and member of the Socialist Party, wrote to his local draft board in Long Island, New York, on December 4, 1917: “I am in receipt of the green card, notifying me to report for military service and that I am hereafter subject to military law. I have all my life been a conscientious objector to war and have had a sincere abhorrence to all military affairs and institutions.

**“If I were to obey your call, I would be a traitor to my conscience.”**

If I were to obey your call, I would be a traitor to my conscience. Forced into the army, my state of mind would cause me to be a very inefficient soldier and almost useless to the authorities. Furthermore, President Wilson has stated that this would not be a conscription of the unwilling and I am decidedly unwilling, in the full sense of the word. I desire to inform you that for these reasons, I deem it inadvisable for me to report as per your notice. You can find me at all times at my home.” A.P. Shubin, of the Molokans in Arizona, also called the Holy Jumpers, wrote on January 20, 1918 [circa], “Sheriff Young questioned [those who would not register about their decision...]. They quietly replied, ‘We cannot register because the Holy Spirit has forbidden it.’ He then attempted to frighten them by saying, ‘If you do not register, you will be sent into the army and go to France where you may be shot and killed.’ Filled with the power and strength of the Lord they answered, ‘Do with us as you wish but we shall never sign our names.’”

Samuel Halperin stated to his draft board in New York City, “As a Socialist and a member of the Working Class, I...declare that I must refuse to submit to Militarism, which aims to make the Worker the tool of the Capitalist in acquiring new markets, or all markets. All wars are fought for exploitation for the continuance of the Profit System, upon whose altar, millions of Workers are sacrificed.... The Workers of the World are my brothers, in fact. Because some ruler draws a line, and tells us that all over the line are enemies, is no reason why I should kill my brother. We have but one enemy, the exploiting groups wherever located.”

Julius Eichel, a socialist émigré from Poland and a CO to both WWI and WWII, later wrote: “Men refused to be conscripted for a multitude of reasons, but in all instances they were actuated by ideals and motives as noble and unselfish as those who were willing to be conscripted, and the ardor of the objectors could at least equal that of the militarist. As a group, they would not

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- Technical and community support for military conscientious objectors;
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- Support for COs who refuse to register for the draft and COs seeking citizenship who wish to take the nonviolent oath;
- Counseling military personnel with accuracy and honesty through the GI Rights Hotline;
- Truth in military recruitment information;
- Workshops, training, and speakers on any of the above topics.

\* \* \*

# The Reporter

*American COs in WWI, continued from cover*

concede that government is something they must kill for or die for. On the whole they exhibited a liberal attitude towards those who thought war necessary and permitted those who wished to volunteer for service [to do so]. They hoped to receive the same consideration from their government, but whenever an objector insisted on personal liberty, he suffered, in one way or another, as I did."

On June 5, 1917, the first day of the draft, about 6,000 men registered as conscientious objectors. Upon being called for the draft, a man was considered to be in the military. It was then up to local draft boards to determine their fate. Occasionally, COs were deferred immediately for farm or other work if the draft board was sympathetic to their beliefs. If a board was particularly unsympathetic, a CO was put directly in a local jail or other facility for a long period. For the most part, COs who spoke their convictions to these boards were ignored and made to report to the army camps like all other conscripted men. This catapulted conscientious objectors into the very lap of war fervor. After their arrival in army camps, the COs were usually offered noncombatant work in the Medical, Engineering and Quartermasters' Corps here and abroad. On September 15, 1917, the Secretary of War ordered Camp Commanders to hold the remaining COs segregated, forbidding any "punitive hardship" pending further disposition. Unfortunately, this order did not make it into the hands of all camp personnel, or else it was ignored. The COs themselves were often confused about what to expect and what to do.

The COs realized quickly after their arrival in camp that there were many questions that they did know how to handle. For instance, should a CO resist compliance with medical treatments, such as inoculation or vaccination when they were being ordered by the military? Should a CO refuse to drill even when they were just bayoneting inanimate bags of sticks, or would such participation indicate a willingness to carry weapons into combat, to be used against real people? All of these, and more, were seen as tests by army officials to prove the CO's sincerity and plagued many of the COs throughout their tenure at the army camps, and later in prison. Some men were worn down by it all, and agreed to put on the military uniform, or to work in the camps, or to accept noncombatant roles in the army, even though they did not entirely approve of these decisions for themselves or others. But for some COs, these were unacceptable compromises, and no amount of persuasion could make them change their minds. Norman Thomas, a Presbyterian minister and CO later reported, "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. So it came to pass that 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."

Though COs wrote about humane officers who treated them respectfully, many times both officers and enlisted men did everything they could to show their distaste for the COs and their determination to break the COs of their convictions, or at least get them to agree to noncombatant service. They administered beatings, soakings with water hoses, hangings by the neck over tree branches and railings or head-down into a cesspit, orders to stand at attention in extreme heat or cold for many hours, as well as shouts, kicks and curses.

Major Walter Kellogg, chairman of the Army Board of Inquiry on COs, excused and trivialized this behavior thusly: "Generally, the hazings were undertaken in a spirit of fun; they very probably, on the whole, did little harm to the objector, however much they may have been contrary to the regulations of the Department and the discipline of the Army. Indeed, it is to the great credit of the Army that they were not far more common." The COs themselves, however, found this treatment less than amusing. Some took it as a way of suffering for their faith. Some accepted it as what they must go through in order to prove the rightness of their cause. The vast majority were determined not to retaliate in word or deed, thus proving their sincere desire to be nonviolent.

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# For Conscience' Sake

*American COs in WWI, continued from p.2*

George Miller, a Mennonite at Camp Upton, New York, wrote about one ordeal he went through for refusing to obey military commands: "I again gave my reasons in detail why I could not obey the orders. Then the Sergeant in charge and a Guard dragged me downstairs.... The sergeant then began to beat and torture me, using his fists, ...[for] one...to two hours, slapping and punching me. He also thrust his bayonet into me several times and used it on my hands.... At times he rested up so as to regain energy and to resume beating me again.... At no time did I offer any resistance because as a conscientious objector I am opposed to violence." The next night, after Miller was in bed, a mob descended and took him and four other COs to the shower where they were deluged with freezing cold water until they put on uniforms, which they would not do. Miller's nightclothes were torn off of him and he was scrubbed with stiff brushes and hit with brooms till his body was raw. When he still refused the uniform, they held him upside down in a full tub of water until he was nearly asphyxiated. It took three months for Miller to heal from this abuse. Later he wrote, "I am going through life with a physical defect which was caused by mistreatment in camp, but I am happy I was taught to uphold the principle of nonresistance as Christ taught and lived, and those of our heroes of faith who have gone before. Returning good for evil will still have its effect upon a nation and church if only put into practice."

COs were subjected to frequent arguments from military personnel about their stance, and also from visitors to the camps and prisons. William Marx Kantor, a Socialist from Philadelphia who later became a Quaker, wrote in his memoir about 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....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...."

By June 1918, camp commanders decided that the "absolutist" COS, those who would not comply with any military order, were too much trouble to keep around, and the Board of Inquiry was established to interview the COs about their "sincerity." Out of

this, about 1200 were offered farm furloughs and 100 were assigned to Quaker war relief work in France. (The American Friends Service Committee was founded in 1917 during World War I to give young conscientious objectors ways to serve without joining the military or taking lives.) The rest were court martialed. Many of these men had only had a few years of schooling, and it was easy for the military lawyers to exploit any holes in their testimony and deem them insincere. Some COs were more educated or, like the Socialists, had more experience in discussing the war and their own objections to it and were able to defend themselves. The roughly 450 "absolutist" COs were sent to federal prisons at Alcatraz Island, California; Fort Jay on Governor's Island, New York; or Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, where some continued to follow their principles by



*Charcoal drawing by WWI CO Maurice Becker, 1919, depicting treatment of COs at Ft. Leavenworth. US Library of Congress*

refusing the forced labor. For their refusal, the COs were held in solitary confinement in dark, cold cells on a bread and water diet. Even worse was the manacling, in which prisoners were shackled to the doors of their cells so that their arms were held above their heads for nine hours a day during work hours, with only their toes touching the damp floor of their cells. News of this practice was smuggled out by a CO and it was brought to the attention of President Woodrow Wilson, who prohibited it in December 1918. The abolition of this inhumane practice for all federal prisoners was just one of the many human rights victories won through the sacrifice and witness of COs through the years.

The majority of COs who had been imprisoned at Alcatraz, Leavenworth or elsewhere were eventually transferred to the prison at Fort Douglas, Utah, where the COs continued to be pressured to agree to

things that were in violation of their beliefs. Some COs did finally compromise in order to get out; some were released by May 1919 through Presidential amnesty. Those COs thought to be the most recalcitrant, unwilling to the end to waiver in their beliefs, such as Socialists David Eichel and Howard Moore, remained in prison until 1920.

Harold Studley Gray wrote of the "majesty of conscience" and the price he and thousands of COs paid to protect it. This legacy is one we should learn from and honor as instrumental in ensuring a place for dissent in our country – a critical element of a free society. 🌐

# The Reporter

## The “Religious Right” Resisted WWI

By Jay Beaman

In a day when the “Religious Right” seems intent on defining the role of government to be limited *only* to military endeavors, it is useful for us to remember that many of the groups we now think of as the Religious Right have a history of resisting *specifically the military end* of government. Richard H. Gamble, in *The War for Righteousness*, argued that it was not the conservative churches that got behind World War One, but the progressive churches. The most progressive mainline denominations supported World War One, and only later came to oppose World War Two. In WWI, it was the “backward looking” religious denominations (mostly sects) that opposed it, notable among them were Pentecostals, Holiness, Assemblies of God, and the Apostolic Church, many of whom were often referred to as “Holy Rollers.”

A search of online newspapers on the term “Holy Rollers” will find sensational accounts – and even trouble. Worship was loud, unprogrammed, and lasted far too late. The police came. There were arrests. Then, in 1917 and 1918, when the United States entered the Great European War, something changes in the coverage of Holy Rollers. Still, they are arrested, but it was different. They were now being arrested for sedition and being unpatriotic. Holy Rollers in large numbers were mobbed, tarred and feathered, arrested, jailed, and imprisoned for various mishaps over the war. Not a few of them took the government at its word when told to fill out their draft registration form on June 5, 1917. They were instructed that if you need an exemption just write your reason for exemption on line twelve of the registration card. And write they did. The Apostolic Faith and nearly all its newly formed splinter sects were claiming exemption to war on appeal to conscience, conscientious objection, or religious scruples as they termed it. Those who did so considered this holy resistance. Their draft registration cards rang with objection to war on religious grounds.

They also had other problems with conscription. They objected to being vaccinated, which was one of the first steps in induction. They believed in Divine Healing, and doctors and drugs were often not trusted. Putting faith in medicine might even be a sign of lack of faith in God.

Holy Rollers also were against giving money to fund the war machine. World War One was partially funded by public donations, largely through the purchase of war bonds, which were promised to mature later with interest.

War savings bonds were hawked in every community by local patriotic leaders, and the money went directly into funding the war effort. Everyone was expected to give. To refuse, especially if one gave justifications for refusal, was to be unpatriotic and even seditious, having spoken against and impeded the war effort. It was treated as a felony, and Holy Rollers showed up in newspapers, in thousands of pages of FBI files, and in local jails and prisons.

How could such a religious social movement be so organized across the country, rural and urban, as to inspire Holy Roller to become synonymous with sedition and popularized as unpatriotic and dangerous? The public had been hyped up to support the war, to pay for the war, to sacrifice for the war, to give their young men for the war. By their objection, Holy Rollers could easily be cast as selfish, uncooperative and unpatriotic. Once the news had cast a role for Holy Rollers, the public was eager to paint them as such. For their part, Holy Rollers were just glad for the press. Their brand was difference and they wore it proudly. The real danger they represented was *indifference* to the national cause. But to them, the Holy Rollers already had a cause.

I am often asked how the Pentecostal movement could become so mainstream and religious-right in our day, only a century after their birth and their powerful, widespread witness against the war. WWI changed the world in complex ways. Instead of the war bringing about the end of the world, the Allies had taken back Palestine from the “Turks,” bringing the world closer to the coming of Jesus. Many of those who went to jail and many who went to war, and many who stayed behind to pray and work were just glad the great trial was over. Their churches had grown dramatically. It was time to organize the work. By 1967, a half century of militarization had made them feel at home in this world, and most Pentecostal organizations quietly changed their official religious views to match that sentiment. As they awaited the coming of Jesus, they were encouraged to make changes from *within* the organizations of society, something they could now comfortably do, even by war. 🌐

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# For Conscience' Sake

## In Their Own Words: Testimonies of Conscientious Objectors in WWI

It's one thing to know that conscientious objectors were put in solitary confinement, beaten, waterboarded, hung by their thumbs, forced into 'coffin cages' and thrown out of windows. But reading their words, written at that time about their experiences, gives it a whole new meaning. We share some of their testimony here.

MAY WE ALWAYS REMEMBER.

In a letter to his father, Duane Swift wrote, "We are in a room 18 x 30 feet and the ceiling so low a tall man could touch it. Ten small windows with iron mesh, barb wire and screening covering them, and from 50 to 60 of us in here. Just imagine Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday in this place with the temperature about 100 outside."



*Illustration of CO held shackled to his jail cell bars.*

*Image Credit:  
Hutterite COs in World War I,  
Spring Prairie Printing*

Phillip Grosser was imprisoned at Alcatraz where he spent 2 months in the coffin cages. For 8 hours a day he was in the cage; the other 16 were in solitary confinement on a bread and water diet—with no human contact. In a letter from prison he described the cages:

"The cages were 23 inches wide and 12 inches deep. Each cage was made of iron bars bolted to the door of the cells. The prisoner stood upright, with an adjustable board to his back to reduce the depth to about 9 inches so as to make a tight fit—a veritable iron straight jacket." To the best of our knowledge, these cages were used *only* for conscientious objectors.

That was not the only abuse Phillip Grosser described in his letters: "I was beaten black and blue, kicked and jumped upon.... I am ready to suffer the supreme penalty with a smile on my face, but damn if they will make me observe military rules by force...my will power is stronger than the bayonet and my ideas will not be shot out of my head." Although he remained true to his principles, he was devastated by this experience. Phillip committed suicide in 1933.

Ivan Sussoff, a Molokan imprisoned at Fort Riley, Kansas wrote, "When we got here they began to torture us again. They dragged me like an animal with rope around my neck. That peeled the skin off my neck. They shaved my head. They cut my ears. They put a sabre to my neck. They tore my shirt in pieces and wanted me to put on a uniform. They threw me into an ice-cold bath. I did not count how many times they beat me. Once in one of those ice-cold baths I fainted and they took me out and tortured me again. They pulled the hairs off my feet like feathers. I was motionless. I only prayed to God to take me away from this world full of horrors. My hope and belief in God saved me."

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In Their Own Words, *continued from p.5*

Andreas Wurtz, one of the imprisoned Hutterite conscientious objectors, wrote, "Sergeant ordered ropes brought which were used to bind each leg ... they pulled one leg at a time. Suddenly they pulled both ropes causing me to fall backwards, hurting my back and head and rendering me unconscious. They pulled me along the floor, up and down the hallway over the door ledges. I uttered an outcry—the slivers from the floor had penetrated my entire body... next they took me to my room, filled the bathtub with cold water, told me to remove my clothes, (which I did) and forced me under the water. I tried to hold my breath but I could not; the four men could not hold me under the water. They tried again; I saw that I was becoming unsuccessful in my attempt to hold my breath.... They held me under the water until they thought that by this time I would be expired. They lifted me out of the water and all I heard them say was that they would be back later to do it again. ... Next morning, they placed me under a cold shower tap; a few hours later they came in and felt the water to see if I had turned on the warm water. At night the four came again and forced me under the water.... Upon lifting me out of the water one said, 'Why doesn't your God help you now?' and struck me with his fist in my stomach as forcefully as he could; I was again unconscious for a long period of time. Next day they brought a broom to me and ordered me to sweep the floor. I said I would wash and sweep my own room but that was all. One of the men struck me over the head with the broom handle, using such force that the handle splintered into three pieces. I was again unconscious. At night the routine was the same.... For a full week I had no sustenance. The odor from my stomach was so pungent that I myself could not tolerate the odor. I can remember one day that someone brought a delicious plate of food into my room. ... The food was tempting, but by the time I had blessed it, one of the men had seen the plate of food and took the meal away from me. Now, contemplate for a few seconds: how would you feel committing such an act as that? How cruel can people be? Taking food from someone when they have not eaten for seven days? ... I was in this situation for three weeks and became physically deficient to the extent that I could barely walk. They began bringing me small quantities of food again."

From a letter smuggled out of jail by Clark Getts, one of the COs sentenced to 25 years:

"Several Molokans have been hunger striking in the hole. Two of them were beaten so beastly that even the authorities were shocked . . . other beatings and torture are matters of general knowledge and were accepted by the authorities as justifiable. These Russians were so weak at the end of six days that two of them had to be sent to the hospital—veritable ghosts . . . They are ready to die in this dungeon. Their courage, so firm and beautiful, shames the others of us."



*Illustration of hands cuffed to cell bars.*

*Image Credit:  
Hutterite COs in World War I,  
Spring Prairie Printing*

Many of us who are conscientious objectors are told that we have the right to be conscientious objectors because the military fights to protect that right. Most people who become conscientious objectors once in the military know, from personal experience, how untrue that statement is.

The truth is that we now have legal protection for conscientious objectors in the United States because of these courageous men and others like them who suffered greatly at the hands of the US military. Their witness inspired others to make sure this did not happen to another generation of people of conscience.

**We are indebted to those who remained steadfast to their conscience, their God and their convictions as the world was consumed by war.**

--Bill Galvin

# For Conscience' Sake

## Women as Defenders of Conscientious Objectors

by Anne M. Yoder

A little-known part of the story of conscientious objectors to World War I lies in the structured support given to them by progressive women such as Frances M. Witherspoon (1886-1973). A graduate of Bryn Mawr College in 1908, she was active in woman suffrage and anti-war efforts until the US joined WWI in 1917. It was then that Witherspoon took up her most important work. In May 1917, Witherspoon became a co-founder and Executive Secretary of the New York Bureau of Legal First Aid, which was started with a \$100 grant from the Woman's Peace Party. It was the first organization to furnish free legal advice and counsel to anyone who came into conflict with the new laws related to America's entry into World War I. This included draft resisters, conscientious objectors, and deserters. By 1918 it was aiding at least 5,000 clients and changed its name to the New York Bureau of Legal Advice (NYBLA). Though raided by the Bureau of Investigation in 1918, which disrupted its functioning temporarily, the NYBLA continued with its anti-war campaigns throughout the war.

Charles Recht, a Czech-born attorney, was the General Counsel of the NYBLA. Witherspoon carried on its daily work, including fundraising, working with attorneys and volunteers, organizing lobbying campaigns, maintaining correspondence, and interviewing clients.

Both religious and political COs turned to the Bureau for help and to report the mistreatment against them.



(l-r:) Tracy Mygatt, Frances Witherspoon,  
Mercedes Moritz (Randall)

Photo Credit: Swarthmore College Peace Collection

Two early problems which faced the NYBLA were the intransigence of local draft boards toward COs, and the fact that once COs were drafted they came under military authority and control at training camps. The draft law did not provide camp commanders and officers with clear guidelines for handling COs; only some months after they had arrived were those in charge told to treat them with "kindly consideration," to segregate them from other enlisted men, and not to bring "punitive hardships" upon them. This was often not enough direction.

Bruno Grunzig worked for a time in the Bureau office as a referral agent for other COs. When COs were drafted and sent to military training camps near enough New York City to visit, Frances Witherspoon did so – at times accompanied by Grunzig. Even more importantly, Witherspoon maintained an active correspondence with many COs, and wrote to camp officials and to the Secretary of War about the problems that had been told to her in these letters. Grunzig himself was drafted in the Spring of 1918 and joined some of the men he had visited at Camp Dix, New Jersey. He and a few others around the country reported often to Witherspoon and her partner, Tracey Mygatt, and these were invaluable supplies of fresh information.

Many of the surviving letters to loved ones written by COs tended to water down the truth of what was happening to them so as not to worry anyone. Harry Lee wrote to the NYBLA about conditions at Camp Upton, concluding with "I mention the facts that if you deem them important I leave the matter in your care. You will kindly not mention these conditions to my wife, but will inform her I am first rate and having a 'comfortable time.'" It was the very bluntness of the letters written to the NYBLA, in contrast, that helps us today to feel what our CO predecessors went through for the sake of conscience.

Another important source of information for the NYBLA was through the relationships built with women – especially the wives, girlfriends and mothers of COs, who wrote of their attempts to see their men in camps, where they were often being held in guardhouses. The women faced their own harassment (Mrs. Sadie Brandon recounted that one officer told her she should divorce her no-good CO husband and marry him instead), but were stalwart in standing up for the men they cared for and showing themselves to be conscientious objectors in their own right.

*continued on p.8*

# The Reporter

**“ I have no country to fight for;  
my country is the earth;  
I am a citizen of the world. ”**

**Eugene V. Debs:**

## **World War I's Most Famous Resister**

Not all war resisters during World War I were imprisoned for refusing conscription or for religious reasons. Perhaps the most famous of these was Eugene V. Debs, whose charge was Sedition.

In 1918 Debs proclaimed, *“I abhor war. I would oppose war if I stood alone. When I think of a cold, glittering steel bayonet being plunged into the white [sic], quivering flesh of a human being, I recoil with horror. I have often wondered if I could take the life of my fellow man, even to save my own.”*

Forcefully speaking out against the War on June 16, 1918 in Canton, Ohio, Debs said, *“The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose – especially their lives.”* For this he was arrested on ten counts of violating the Espionage Act of 1917, which limited the constitutional right to free speech when it could be interpreted as encouraging people to refuse conscription. Emma Goldman was arrested for the same a year earlier.

At his sentencing Eugene Debs declared, *“Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest of the earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”*

Sentenced to ten years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Debs ran for President of the United States (his fifth attempt) from his prison cell in 1920, receiving just under one million votes. Such was the nationwide support for his courageous stand. His sentence was commuted to time served by President Harding and he was released from prison on Christmas Day, 1921. 🌍

-- Richard Capron

## **Women as Defenders, continued from p. 7**

The women shared stories of what they heard from the COs – in one case they brought together verification that helped to end the reign of oppression against COs. Lottie Fishbein, Elsie Knepper (both of whom had worked for the Civil Liberties Bureau\* and had close ties with the NYBLA), Frieda Ledermann Jasmagy, Sadie Brandon, and Alice Navard were instrumental in collecting from COs at Fort Riley and Camp Funston a wealth of damning evidence against camp officials and conscripted men.

This testimony told of savage treatment perpetrated between July 5<sup>th</sup> and October 21<sup>st</sup> – “bayonetting, forced cold showers under fire hoses for up to fifteen minutes at a time (sometimes repeatedly) in the middle of the night, vicious blows, and hanging by the thumbs. Manacling of the wrists to prison bars for nine hours a day for fourteen days in a row, which was a legal military punishment for recalcitrant soldiers, was also frequently employed” (*A World Without War*, p. 112).

These tortures were made known by the civil liberties network, which produced such a public outcry that the War Department was forced to order a military investigation. The officials in charge were exonerated, but this investigation started a greater chorus of disapproval against shackling. This led Secretary of War Baker to publicly announce on December 6, 1918 that “fastening of prisoners to the bars of cells will no more be used as a mode of punishment” (War Department New Bureau Press Release, no. 9).

Frances Witherspoon lobbied tirelessly on behalf of those whose civil liberties were being infringed upon during the war hysteria of 1917-1919. The files of the NYBLA reflect the hundreds of men and women with whom she corresponded, and the attempts the organization made to reveal the truth to government officials and to the general public. They are also a testament to her unflagging concern that dissenters be supported and that dissent in America be given its necessary and proper place. 🌍

\*The NYBLA should not be confused with the American Union Against Militarism's Civil Liberties Bureau (later the independent National Civil Liberties Bureau, led by Roger Baldwin, which became the ACLU).



# For Conscience' Sake

## Inspired by Their Witness: Statements on Conscientious Objection in WWI

As a conscientious objector who had the privilege of performing alternative service in Vietnam during the war, I benefited directly from the response to the hardships experienced by WWI conscientious objectors. Their difficult experiences became the impetus for developing alternative service legislation in advance of WWII, and offer an **important challenge** to us across the decades. Do we have the moral courage and commitment necessary in our communities to nurture conscience against war? Are we organized to protect the political and human rights that allow conscientious objectors to live out their beliefs? Our WWI history reminds us to prepare, organize, study and model the way of peace.

*Titus Peachey*

*Mennonite Vietnam War-era Conscientious Objector*



Let us not forget those who bravely endured suffering and shame for the sake of Christ and His church. Both Hutterites and Mennonites confessed that they love their country and were profoundly thankful to God and to their authorities for the liberty of conscience which they truly enjoyed. They were loyal to their God-ordained government, and desired to serve their country in ways and duties which do not interfere with their religious convictions. Only through the help of the Lord, and with God's guiding spirit could **they have remained steadfast and loyal to their religious convictions**. Praise to the Lord. Amen

*Elias P. Wipf*

*New Rockport Colony (Hutterite)*



Those who would "seek peace and pursue it," should apply the experience of conscientious objectors to WWI in anticipating the obstacles to this quest. (There are analogies in the present government's duplicity.) As war approached, the peace churches sought provision for conscientious objectors. They invoked the practice of Russia in allowing Mennonites (including Hutterites) to do civilian forestry work as had been the basis for their initial refuge under Catherine the Great. That hope was disappointed as the War Department prepared forced labor camps. Those imprisoned there were required to work daily. Those whose consciences would not accept the demands for labor for the war effort were caged and tortured. The Hofer brothers died of exposure at Alcatraz and returned home, one of them in the uniform he had refused to wear. **Although government is "ordained by God," nevertheless it is not of God.** In these times as at WWI, we need to be wary of promises and aware of the possibility that the intentions are not promising.

*Rev. L. William (Bill) Yolton,*

*NISBCO Executive Director Emeritus*



As a Church of the Brethren preacher I have the same task of reading and teaching Jesus' words of peace that has shaped us as conscientious objectors since our beginning. As a peacebuilder and policy advocate I am tasked with helping our denomination **continue to work for peace and resist war in a new time**. Though I am too young to have experienced the draft, I am encouraged by the long legacy of those who have made great sacrifices as part of their faith.

*Nate Hosler*

*Church of the Brethren, Washington, DC*



The legacy of WWI conscientious objectors is extremely important because it **helped shape how future COs would be treated**. Their stand for conscience against absolute brutality and degradation paved the way for a formal recognition of CO status and a vast improvement in how COs would be treated. As a modern-day CO, I faced no violence and little harassment, all because these brave people stood up for morality 100 years ago."

*Jarrold Grammel*

*US Air Force CO, Discharged 2015*



As a longtime member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and as a thirty-year conscientious objector, I can trace my lineage directly to the courageous witness of those who chose conscientious objection in World War I. One hundred years later, we would be wise to **examine that history with care, to emulate their courage**, and to **shape our own strategies** in a way that pays homage to those on whose shoulders we stand.

*Rick Ufford-Chase*

*Fmr Moderator, Gen. Assembly, Presbyterian Church, USA*



## Global CO News Briefs

Israel: On March 23, Conscientious Objector Tamar Ze'evi was released from the Israeli army prison after presenting herself in front of the military "conscience committee." Tamar was in prison for 115 days for refusing to join the army and serve the occupation. This is the first time in 15 years that the army recognized an occupation-refuser as a conscientious objector.

Sweden: On March 2, Sweden announced it would reinstate conscription in 2018. The new conscription laws apply equally regardless of gender. Recent Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine has increased fears in Europe, and was cited as a reason for reinstating conscription. It remains unclear what the options will be for conscientious objectors. Non-military community service will be available, but afterward the conscript is part of the civilian reserve. Unarmed conscripts will still serve in some sort of civilian defense duty, meaning COs may have few choices available to them in a society preparing for war. Will the return of Swedish conscription spark a new trend in Europe?

# The Reporter

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## One Hundred Years Later: What We Can Learn from the Experiences of WWI COs

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On November 11, 1918, fighting ceased and The Great War came to an end. Armistice Day was intended to be marked every year in honor of the cause of World Peace. “The War to End All Wars” wasn’t, of course, and has been followed by a century of nearly continuous war, to this day. The November 11<sup>th</sup> holiday is now called Veterans Day, meant to keep our focus on the war and the “warrior,” overshadowing and perhaps even intentionally erasing the promise of World Peace and the experiences of the COs in World War One.

After the First World War ended, there was some debate on whether the horrifying accounts of the brutal treatment of the men who refused to kill were real. The talking point was that the COs were treated with “leniency,” but the truth was recorded in letters, diaries, and family and community histories. It also was entered into the Congressional Record on March 4, 1919, in testimony provided by the National Civil Liberties Bureau:

“At the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Alcatraz Island, California, four religious objectors—three Hofer brothers and Jacob Wipf—were placed in a perfectly dark dungeon where water seeped in from the sea, their outer clothing removed, and where they were fed only small amounts of bread and water. At the end of the fifth day they were removed by the recommendation of the medical examiner and placed in isolation. Later they were transferred to Fort Leavenworth. Two of the brothers died of pneumonia within ten days of their arrival. The body of one of these men was sent home dressed in military uniform of the United States Army, although he had gone to prison because of his refusal to wear the uniform.”

It eventually became clear to their jailors that no amount of abuse or torture, humiliation or ridicule, could force the COs to compromise their beliefs in any way. So why go to such lengths to punish a person who will not fight? To try to coerce a person into denying their most fundamental values and principles?

The answer is that the violence of war is not natural for humanity. It must be taught and continually reinforced. The inevitability of violence and injustice is a myth – a myth that persists at the hands of media and government who choose to strengthen their own influence and harden their own power by sowing fear and division among our communities.

In our work at the Center on Conscience & War, the stories of the conscientious objectors we work with serve as daily reminders and individual case studies that prove that humanity is naturally predisposed to peace: **our conscience tells us cooperation with others is right and that injustice and violence against others is wrong.**

In a time when it feels like the military and the culture of violence have colonized so much of our lives, our lands, our economy, our culture, and even in many cases, our churches, there is one part of us that cannot be colonized – at least not permanently: our conscience. And that fact poses a great threat to the ability to make and perpetuate war. Norman Thomas wrote of COs in WWI, “This insignificant fraction of the youth of America challenged the power of the state when it was mightiest and the philosophy of war when it was most pervasive. They said, “You may kill us but you can’t make us fight against our will.” They said it not as men who court martyrdom but as men who serve principle; not as those who despised the state but as those who refused to make it God. **If enough of them had said that thing in every land, there would have been no war.**” [Emphasis added.]

The military knows this well, and it is evident in the lengths they go to try to make kids into killers. Basic military training is a science expressly designed to circumvent the conscience. If killing was natural it would come easily for us, be good for us and allow us to thrive. Hundreds of thousands of veterans struggling with the trauma of moral injury – wounds to the soul caused by a transgression against the conscience – are poignant proof of our tragic misunderstanding of our own nature.

As we go forward in our work to build peace and end war, we lift up the stories of those who suffer for having fought and those who suffer for having refused to fight.

Both teach the same lesson.



*COs at Fort Douglas, Utah, October 18, 1919  
Photo: William Kantor Papers,  
Swarthmore College Peace Collection*

# For Conscience' Sake

## The Great War Meets Great Resistance

*continued from back cover*

In March 1918, Ernest Gellert was found dead in his prison cell in Fort Hancock, New Jersey from a gunshot wound to his head. While his family maintained he was murdered, a note was found at his side:

"I fear I have not succeeded in convincing the authorities of the sincerity of my scruples against participation in war. I feel that only by my death will I be able to save others from the mental tortures I have gone through. If I succeed, I give my life willingly." Military Intelligence claimed they had shown "patience, sympathy and tolerance" towards Gellert, and blamed the National Civil Liberties Bureau, who advocated for the rights of COs, for his death (Kohn, p. 32).

From another letter smuggled out of prison, November 1918:  
"Some of the Russians now in confinement have gone through the worst experiences in jail which the worst of the Tzars had to offer.... They swear that their life there was easy in comparison to this.... [A] corporal is being tried for beating up two Russians—for their refusal to salute and work. He administered one of his pummelings in the office of the Executive Officer who himself had to stop the struggle. But he is being tried because his specific act was not authorized. The 'hole' treatment is known by everyone in all its details and is accepted by the authorities...." (Schlissel, *Conscience in America*, p. 156-7).

Major Walter Kellogg, Chairman of the Army CO Board of Inquiry, and author of *The Conscientious Objector*, published in 1919, describes the religious objector, mentioning by name the Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, Dunkards, Christadelphians, Churches of Christ, Assemblies of God, Hutterites, and Brethren:

"He was taught from his mother's knee to pay strict attention to the Bible, to his ministers and to his elders.... When they tell him that war is wrong, and that no Christian can fight, and he finds the same ideas in different passages in the Bible, his obsession against war becomes absolute and fixed. One feels there is something radically wrong with this boy. . .He is good, and kind, and, were he possessed of some social sense, he might in time have many of the attributes of a good citizen.... He says he loves his country, but inasmuch as he loves all his enemies, he has no enemies. He will not use force, he will not fight in war.... In many cases he is a moron."

Kellogg contrasted those folks with what he called the idealist objector: "His spectacles are so much the color of the rose that the frailties of human beings, and even their wars, are things to be dealt with only through gentleness and love. He is impracticable and visionary; his mentality is only half-baked. His feet long since have left the earth and his wagon is hitched to the stars." May we all be worthy of such a tribute. 🌍



*A solitary confinement cell for COs at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, with a board and blanket for sleeping.*

## An Update on Selective Service Registration

Throughout 2016 Congress considered proposals to include women in Selective Service registration. At the end of the year, as a compromise included in the "must pass" National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Congress established a *National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service* with a mandate to study whether "there continues to be a continuous or potential need for a military selective service process . . . and if so, whether such a system should include mandatory registration by all citizens and residents, regardless of sex."

We do not expect to see any changes to the current registration requirement until the Commission issues its report in a couple of years, however bills to extend the registration to women or to end Selective Service entirely could be introduced at any time. It has been almost 20 years since Congress has seriously considered whether to end the registration and shut down Selective Service. **This is a unique opportunity to make our voices heard.** The Center on Conscience & War supports an end to draft registration for all. We will continue to follow this issue as it evolves and keep you updated. 🌍



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## WWI Commemorative Edition

### Great Resistance to the “Great War”



A century ago, on May 18, 1917, the Selective Service Act – the WWI draft law – set in motion a series of events that would forever alter countless lives, and continues to touch our lives today. The law attempted to provide for conscientious objectors (COs), but the protections it afforded were weak and inadequate, to say the least. To qualify as a CO, one had to be “a member of any well recognized religious sect or organization organized and existing May 18, 1917, and whose then existing creed or principles forbid its members to participate in war in any form.” This meant that COs who were not members of such a church were automatically disqualified. Still, even those COs who could meet the strict requirements of the law were subject to military service, albeit in “noncombatant” roles, such as cooks or medics.

Between May 1917 and November 1918, 64,693 CO applications were filed with Selective Service. About 20,900 of those COs were drafted, and most accepted noncombat military service. Initially 3,989 of these COs refused to perform any kind of military service, but, under the law, once an individual was drafted, he was considered to be in the military, whether he agreed to this or not. Consequently, resisters were taken to military camps and even prisons to be “persuaded,” often with violence, abuse and torture, to perform military service. Eventually, 1300 of the initial resisters would accept noncombatant military service, often as a means to bring an end to the abuse they endured at the hands of the US Army.

“The treatment of World War I resisters was barbaric. At least 17 objectors died in jail as a direct consequence of torture or poor prison conditions. Others were driven insane. Common punishment for COs (and other military prisoners) consisted of two consecutive weeks in solitary confinement on a bread and water diet in a completely dark cell, chained or handcuffed to the wall for nine hours a day. Objectors were imprisoned in unsanitary guard houses, often without blankets in unheated cells during the winter months. Men were forcibly clad in [military] uniform, beaten, pricked or stabbed with bayonets, jerked about with ropes around their necks, threatened with summary execution. . . In at least 2 cases, men were immersed in the filth of latrines” (Stephen Kohn, *Jailed for Peace*, p. 29). In the end, some 500 COs who resisted military service were tried by military court martial, with 354 receiving jail sentences. One hundred forty-two COs were sentenced to life. Seventeen were given death sentences, and, though no one was executed, at least that many died at the hands of their abusers in prison. The punishment of COs during WWI by the US was far more severe than England and Germany, where maximum sentences were two and four years, respectively. The average sentence for an American CO was longer than 16 and a half years.

*continued on p. 11*

