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Mennonite Pacifist People and the Good War
by Paul Toews

A. J. Neuenschwander, long-time Mennonite minister, conference leader and member of the General Conference Mennonite Peace Committee, articulated the expectant spirit of many Mennonite leaders in early 1941 when the Civilian Public Service (CPS) system was just getting started. Writing to Henry A. Fast, who became the first administrator of the Mennonite-run CPS camps, he expressed gratitude for the generosity of a political system that granted alternative service for conscientious objectors. The opportunity gave the Mennonites a chance to fulfill their civic obligations largely beyond the purview of the military system. It was a moment of high significance, both for a government under military siege to offer such a generous alternative and for Mennonites to demonstrate to themselves and to the nation that their pacifism was "constructive . . . instead of destructive." He mused to Fast, "will a new day dawn from this?" It was a question to be sure. But behind the question was an optimism that characterized Mennonite leaders at the outset of the war. The war could be a new day for Mennonites.

The Second World War was a unique experience for Mennonites. Not since the American colonial period, if then, had Mennonites worked so closely with the American state. War, which traditionally made Mennonites and the state enemies, here strangely and, in the end, paradoxically drew them together. The partnership that emerged between the religious pacifist community and the political order was unique in American history. Mennonites brought to this partnership a theology that more clearly separated the church from the state than the other religious pacifists. Yet the Mennonite embrace of the state-devised system was more unreserved than that of other religious pacifists. Those whose theology seemed most severely strained by the political necessities of the wartime affiliation were the most silent about the weaknesses and compromises inherent in the collaboration.

The war was a novel venture into the rights of religious dissenters. Unlike some previous wars, conscientious objectors (COs) were given legitimacy and a defined place in the order of a war society. Lewis B. Hershey, Director of Selective Service for most of the war, and friendly toward the COs, labelled it "an experience in democracy . . . such as no nation has ever made before . . . to find out whether our democracy is big enough to preserve minority rights in a time of national emergency."

Hershey encouraged the churches to accept the Civilian Public Service system as an instrument to achieve both public respect by engaging in service of national importance and as a program for shaping the religious and educational ideals of their people. Hershey was right on both counts. Through CPS Mennonites emerged out of the war with a new confidence about their place in the national society and with a revitalized sense of their religious mission. The war nourished the ideals of service and strengthened the agencies necessary to channel the ideal. The requirements of wartime benevolence matured into a theology of active reconciliation that redefined the public life of the Mennonite world.

But it was hardly Hershey's urging that prompted the Mennonite government partnership. It was the memory of World War I that largely shaped the accommodation of both the pacifist conscience and the state to each other. Central to virtually all Mennonite thinking,
beginning in the mid-1930s was the necessity of preventing a repeat of the World War I conscription system. The indignities and abuses of the first great war were remembered in Mennonite homes and churches during the interwar period. Mennonite historians looking back on the war assumed that it had permanently altered the relationship between the nonresistant peoples and the militaristic state of the twentieth century. C. Henry Smith, a leading Mennonite historian, was persuaded that the future relationships would be more difficult than the past. Governments would be less willing to make concessions for distinctive minorities. He understood that democratic societies were frequently less able to accommodate special interests than the autocratic rulers of past segments of Mennonite history. Furthermore he feared that America during the First World War approximated totalitarian societies in making the state the supreme object of loyalty and worship.

Guy Hershberger, in 1935, likened the situation facing American Mennonites to what European Mennonites confronted in the nineteenth century with the growing militarization of their societies and the withdrawal of any exception for reasons of conscience. The United States government could easily be tempted with the same. Hershberger was fearful because "the history of the Mennonite church seems to teach that when the forces of militarism become too strong there is always a danger of compromise." As late as 1939 Harold S. Bender, the premier Mennonite historian of the inter-war period, likened the prospects for the Mennonites in a coming war to the martyr tradition of the sixteenth century.

The Mennonite search for an alternative began already in 1919 in response to congressional measures proposing a form of universal military training. In what was surely a record for Mennonite political activism, roughly 25% of the adult Mennonite population signed petitions requesting conscientious objector exemption in any future conscription system. The intellectual articulation of what would become the Mennonite negotiating position came from Guy F. Hershberger in 1935. The occasion was the Mennonite Conference on War and Peace sponsored by one of the denominational peace committees. There were four positions that pacifist peoples could take in response to conscription. The first was to accept regular military service. Deep convictions and a long history prevented church adoption of this possibility. Noncombatant military service was the second possibility. Some Mennonite boys selected this alternative during the First World War. The problem was that noncombatancy was an integral part of the military system. While the task of noncombatants "was not of actual killing" it was "auxiliary to this task." Past experience showed that the incorporation of the noncombatants was so complete that there was almost "no difference between this and the acceptance of military service." The third position, the historic one, was refusal of any kind of service. While this one retained an honorific place in the Mennonite imagination and might again be required, Mennonites in the inter-war years were drawn to a different position.

The fourth position, one that envisioned alternative service, was the preferred one that Hershberger and virtually all Mennonite leadership would subsequently embrace. It was acceptable because of scriptural commands and the history of Mennonite people in relieving suffering and need. The moral example of doing this amidst the destructiveness of war would be particularly salutary for the nation. Furthermore the growing centralization and regimentation that Hershberger and others saw in the nation's devotion to militarism augured for service arrangements rather than exemption.

The most effective means to insure such a system of alternative service amenable to the church was to devise the system and then secure its governmental approval. The domestic political activity of Mennonites working with other peace peoples between 1935 and the September 1940 passage of the Burke-Wadsworth bill was almost wholly focused on guaranteeing acceptance of alternative service. The intervening time until February 6, 1941, when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8675 that established the administrative protocols for the alternative service system, witnessed almost feverish Mennonite political activity to insure that it would be a system with considerable church management.

Those protocols hinged together for six years the government and the Historic Peace Churches in a unique partnership. A few conscientious objectors would serve directly under the supervision of governmental agencies. The overwhelming majority would be placed in camps under the general administration of National Service Board for Religious Objectors (NSBRO) but with the three peace church traditions operating separate camps. It was an ill-defined partnership from the beginning and remained so throughout. The imprecise nature of the understandings permitted interminable bickering. The churches agreed, on a temporary basis, to establish, finance and operate the camps under administrative guidelines established by Selective Service. As the temporary agreements became permanent the questions about the appropriateness of the relationship only intensified. Were the church agencies autonomous or were they agents of Selective Service? Were the religious communities that historically shunned the assumption of governmental responsibilities because of strong theological convictions now agreeing to perform governmental functions or not?

Mennonites in early 1941 were not troubled by these questions. They were euphoric. The relative autonomy of CPS was the best they could have hoped for. The lingering fears of a conscription system based on the WWI experience now gave way to a warm embrace of the new system. Young men called into national service would be permitted to perform their obligation under the guidance of the church. Sequestered in camps under the direction
of NSBRO, but separately operated by the three denominational groups, their service would be done within the confines of their church group, or at worst with fellow pacifists.

In a January 1941 article, "Mennonites and the Civilian Service Program," Henry Fast, the director of the camps for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), expressed this incongruous optimism. "If the people in our churches can catch a vision of the wonderful opportunity God, through this arrangement of the government, has placed at their disposal... they will thank God for the opportunity and undertake it with the determination to make the most of it. Paul believed that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord." 11

The lead editorial in one church periodical—The Mennonite—was just as effusive. "Now our beloved United States has, under the guidance of the heavenly Father seen the need of a law whereby we, with others in true loyalty and love of country are given the privilege of doing service of real benefit to our land, entirely under civilian control." 12

Mennonites long wanting to prove their citizenship, needing to demonstrate the "constructiveness" of their resistance to militarism and define for themselves a different place in American society now had the chance. But they would have to seize the apocalyptic moment. Fast wrote "The question before American Mennonitism now is how they will answer the challenge of their present choice. Their answer will not only test the reality and depth of their loyalty to Christ and their faith in His way of love but, in the light of Mennonite history, will also determine very largely the whole future of Mennonitism in this country." 13

Mennonite Central Committee was confident that the churches and the individual young men would respond to this unusual opportunity "in a sacrificial spirit... and gladly make whatever sacrifice is necessary." The sacrifice to the church, calculated in financial terms, would be over $3 million. Orie Miller, the MCC Executive Secretary, did not hesitate a moment in committing the church to that amount. Writing to Clarence Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee he reflected Mennonite willingness by noting they "would gladly pay their share of the bill. They would do it even though every Mennonite farmer had to mortgage his farm." 14

The Mennonite approach to conceptualizing the CPS system was clearly different from that of other conscientious objectors and from the government as well. It was an approach rooted not in the requirements of statecraft or even the furtherance of the legal rights of the citizenry in a democratic society. With the alternative system in place Mennonites approached the political system more through the injunctions of St. Paul to be subservient to the duly constituted authority. They accepted the restraints and the compromises inherent in this flawed partnership. Both the Friends and Church of the Brethren were less tolerant of various government restrictions. 15 Orie Miller, while always willing to negotiate, would not demand. In discussions with Paul Comley French, Executive Secretary of NSBRO, he made it clear that asking was a different sort of thing than demanding. Articulating the sentiments of most Mennonite leaders he wrote French at one point that "we do not feel called to remind Government of any moral obligation... or even to suggest that they should feel such obligation." 16

The CPS experience rather was to be an act of witness. Work performed in the spirit of charity, goodwill and compassion would make a contribution to the nation's well being. Mennonites would accept a system that kept their boys out of war and then expect that they go "the second mile." Albert Gaeddert, successor of Henry Fast as director of the Mennonite camps during the war, defined that "second mile philosophy." 17 "It does not insist on personal rights, but rather gives thought to the obligations and duties that one has... When compelled to go one mile, the nonresistant Christian does not resist the compulsion but rather stands prepared to volunteer the services of the second mile." 18

The embracive position toward the CPS system was largely rooted in the
memory of World War I and the chance it offered for a civic witness. But the possibilities it offered were also congruent with other changes in the location and self-understanding of Mennonites in the middle third of the twentieth century. The Mennonite story from the sixteenth century to at least the mid-nineteenth century is best understood as an exile experience. Scattered from Western Europe both east and west, Mennonites lived on the margins of various host societies. Distanced from larger social systems by distinctive cultural and religious traditions, Mennonites became a people apart. The integrated nature of twentieth-century societies increasingly threatened that spatial and cultural segregation. But precisely as the isolation and cultural enclavement was passing, a new ideological system was emerging as the carrier of Mennonite identity. That ideological system rooted in the recovery of the sixteenth century Anabaptist tradition reached its high moment when H.S. Bender delivered the Presidential address—"The Anabaptist Vision"—to the 1943 meeting of the American Society of Church History.18

The recovery of the past was clearly a means of shaping the future. Yet the bipolar quality of the historical recovery immediately posed a conundrum. It simultaneously moved Mennonites inward toward the creation of a more intentional "Christian social order" and outward in missional and service activism. It brought Mennonites face to face with what happens to many separatist and idealistic communities. It is the dichotomy between the logic of history and theology that pointed toward separation and the logic of contemporary experience that pointed toward greater social participation.19

The "Anabaptist Vision" address amply pointed to the ambiguity. Bender began by proclaiming that Anabaptism was "a programme for a new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially America and England, had been slowly realizing." As such the ecumenical and missionizing imperative was clear. He concluded by declaring that "the Christian may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ... He must consequently withdraw from the worldly system and create a Christian social order within the fellowship of the church brotherhood."20

The CPS experience nourished both sides of the ambiguity. The government, concerned to minimize opposition from patriotic groups, established most camps in places hidden from public view. Here in the less travelled roads, Mennonites would fashion their own small Christian communities, prepare themselves for the future and point the nation to a better way.

The enthusiasm about war-time service was linked closely to the possibility for Mennonite religious and character development within the confined camp settings. The management partnership between government officials and church leaders allocated all non-working time to the supervision of the church. Beyond the 40-hour working week, the church could structure the educational, recreational and leisure activities. It would be important to offer a full range of personally enriching activities that were also expressive of the nonresistant idealism. In a particular way, church leadership envisaged CPS as opportunity for re-education. Here a generation, forcibly incarcerated by government requirements and sequestered by the autonomy given the churches, would undertake an education in the recently refurbished idealism of the Mennonite tradition. CPS could become the Mennonite university experience.

At the center of the educational program was a "core curriculum" entitled Mennonites and Their Heritage, a set of six booklets designed to acquaint the young men with their tradition and the significance of their present service. Edward Yoder, sitting down to write his pamphlet, noted that "what they want is a kind of mutual back slapping..."
tified, Ura S. Gingerich, unidentified, unidentified, Dwight Yoder, Alfred Zook, Atlee Beachy. Outer row, left side: Grant Stoltzfus, unidentified, unidentified. Outer row, right side: David H. Suderman, Jacob D. Goering, Elmer M. Ediger, unidentified.
effort." It was that, to be sure. But the design was much more. They were lessons in Mennonite ecumenicity. The Mennonite schismatic past was bridged by the grandeur of a shared past. They were lessons in the history of past Mennonite benevolence with a call for renewed emphasis on active reconciling work of the kind embodied in CPS. The forward to each volume, written by general editor H. S. Bender, expressed the transforming aspiration of the booklets and the entire educational program. He hoped they would contribute "to a greater appreciation of the church and its splendid heritage of faith" but also that "from this enriched experience in C.P.S. may there come an enriched service, not only to the church and the nation, but . . . to Christ and His everlasting Kingdom." The camps, while conveying a common religious education, could be a laboratory for differing social strategies. Both the withdrawal and engagement positions became central to the non-working program of various units. Some CPS camps operated on farms purchased by MCC in order to enhance planning and education for subsistence farming. They were part of the larger program of rural and community revitalization championed by some leaders as an appropriate response to the loss of the earlier spatial segregation. Other units specialized in study for post-war relief and reconstruction programs. These units became the breeding place for the leaders of a post-war social activism.23 The enriched service that Bender hoped would arise from CPS was quick in coming. Through CPS, Mennonites became aware of the potential of their theology and its contribution to people beyond themselves. Hemmed in by sectarian constraints, largely self-imposed, the doctrine of nonresistance had heretofore been perceived as appropriate only for the small remnant. The tradition of Mennonite theologizing into the years just preceding the war overwhelmingly insisted on the distinction between pacifism that might be politically adaptable and nonresistance that was politically irrelevant. But Mennonites at least thought their war time service was potentially significant, if not always realized within the limitations of the CPS system. Programs of relief and voluntary service caught the imagination of the Mennonites in the post-war period. The war generated a missional and service activism that transformed Mennonite denominations. The war experience helped to resolve the bipolar quality of the recovery.24 The first reflective examination of the impact of the war on Mennonites was Guy F. Hershberger's 1951 study, The Mennonite Church in the Second World War. Hershberger suggested the war developed a "social consciousness and a new sense of social responsibility." It did that and more. Earlier attempts to find a mediating place between a social gospel and conservatism had failed. The CPS and subsequent voluntary service programs linked orthodoxy to social compassion in a fashion that permitted the church to be socially more activist while remaining theologically conservative. This activism and the development of philosophy and practice of volunteerism became the core of the ideologically revitalized tradition. The nation approached World War I with messianic expectations. The pyrrhic victory of 1918 sobered national aspirations for a second global military confrontation. Parts of the NSBRO constituency approached the beginnings of the Second World War with utopian expectations. Mennonites were not alone. Paul Comly French, the Friends director of NSBRO throughout the war, thought the CPS experience invaluable to the nation's democratic traditions. He thought it made two particular contributions: first it signified the preservation of individual rights amidst a consuming war; and secondly "Civilian Public Service has to make . . . a demonstration of the irresistible power of constructive good will as against force and violence." CPS would do that by forging model communities of peace and harmony out of the diverse peoples coming to each camp. They would "create a pattern of life that will demonstrate the way that nations can live together in peace and harmony."26 The experience of religious dissenters living together, disproportionately from peace churches with religious and cultural similarities made them in actuality a small slice of the larger population. It was hardly appropriate to think that their venture in communal living would become the model for global conflict resolution. But they were not daunted by their exception. While the CPS legacy did not scale those national heights, it did prove to be a transforming experience for Mennonites. A new day did dawn. The church emerged out of the war a changed church. Old issues receded and new ones came to dominate and define its character. Studs Terkel's best seller on World War II is called The Good War. Incongruous as the two words hinged together are, it was a "good war" for Mennonite peace people.

ENDNOTES

A. J. Neuenschwander to H. A. Fast, January 11, 1941, Fast Collection, box 1, folder 7, Men-

Bible class at CPS #27, Mulberry, Florida.


Orie Miller to Paul Comly French, August 25, 1941, CPS Correspondence, 1940-45, file 4, IX-6-3, Mennonite Central Committee Archives, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.

Albert Gaeddert quoted in Gingerich, Service for Peace, p. 404.


See J. Lawrence Burkholder, The Problem of Social Responsibility From the Perspective of the Mennonite Church (Eklart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989).

Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," pp. 3-4 and 23.


See Gingerich, Service for Peace, Chapter XIV looks at some of the "Farm and Community" units. Chapter XV details the "Foreign Relief" training schools attached to some camps. The concern for the revitalization of rural communities is expressed in various places. Consult Gay F. Hershberger, "Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community." Mennonite Quarterly Review XIV (1940): 214-223; Melvin Gingerich, "Rural Life Problems and the Mennonites," Mennonite Quarterly Review XVI (1942): 167-73. I have examined this rural movement as one of the responses to modernity in "Concern: Its Origins and Early History." (forthcoming in Conrad Grebel Review).


Hershberger, The Mennonite Church in the Second World War, p. 286.