Conscientious Objectors in Indiana
During World War II

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The approach of World War II towards American shores found the United States suddenly turning its plowshares into swords and its scythes into spears. This transformation of peace implements into war implements found the latter progressing from swords and spears to rifles, cannon, tanks, and planes. Everyone was expected to do his part in the war effort or be considered a slacker. Yet, the government of the United States recognized the fact that there would be some, who, because of conscientious convictions, would not be able to take part in this war effort. It sought ways and means of best utilizing the work of these persons for the nation.

The problem of the conscientious objector was not a new one to the government. The right of the individual to follow the dictates of his conscience had been an established tradition in the United States and as such was treated with respect for its historic past. Since the Revolutionary War, the conscientious objector had become a recognized factor in this nation. This recognition of the individual's conscience, which may be an inherent right, is really made possible by an act of Congress. The Constitution contains no provision, either expressed or implied, which grants to an individual because of his personal convictions the right to exemption from military service. Such provisions may be found in some state constitutions but not in the constitution of the national government.1 The ideas of alternate service and a distinct noncombatant status in the armed forces were two

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1 Edward A. Fitzpatrick, Universal Military Training (New York, 1946), 298. Article 12, Section 6 of the Indiana constitution states, "no person, conscientiously opposed to bearing arms, shall be compelled to do militia duty; but such person shall pay an equivalent for exemption; the amount to be prescribed by law," Charles Kettleborough, Constitution Making in Indiana (3 vols., Indianapolis, 1916, 1930), I, 360. These volumes are I, II, and XVII of the Indiana Historical Collections (Indianapolis, 1916-).
of this nation's outstanding improvements in the last war.*

Only two nations, Great Britain and the United States, had recognized the right of the individual in his attitude toward participation in war. They had affirmed the rights of conscientious objectors by specifically granting them certain privileges in regard to conscription. The absolute objector, who because of his convictions felt that he could in no way cooperate with his government, was recognized in England by the granting of complete exemption from military service. The United States, however, while not being as liberal towards absolute objectors as England, did show a more liberal treatment of its conscientious objectors than it had in World War I. Yet, in spite of this great liberality, there were still more than five thousand conscientious objectors in prison during the last war. Some were imprisoned because of their opposition to registering under the Selective Service Act, others because they objected on religious grounds and the failure of local selective service boards to recognize their claims, a third group because they had entered into some form of military or civilian service, but later discovered that they could not conscientiously continue in that type of service, a fourth group because of their opposition to certain types of wars which included the one in progress, and finally there were those who claimed objection because of socialistic or communistic ideas. The larger number of conscientious objectors in World War II in comparison to the smaller number in the previous war was due to peacetime conscription, the longer duration of the war, and the increase in population.

About three-fourths of the objectors were sent to federal prisons and the remaining fourth to county jails. Those im-

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prisoned in county jails probably endured more hardships than those in federal prisons, although the jails were to have been approved for the housing of federal prisoners. A conscientious objector who was held in custody in Bum's Row of the Marion County Jail in Indianapolis wrote a description of the conditions which met the new inmate. He stated that no toilet paper, sheet, towel, toothbrush, or pillow could be found. The straw tick and blanket were very filthy. There was a scarcity of good food and very few fresh vegetables or fruits were served. In some cases, those opposed to war were segregated and given preferential treatment, but generally they were treated in the same manner as the other prisoners. Their prison sentences ranged from one to five years, with the average around three years.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, the group which had the largest number of conscientious objectors in prison during World War II, claimed it was impossible for them because of their religious beliefs to render any service which would interfere with their supreme task of preaching the message of the coming Armageddon. Regardless of whether they were farmers, mechanics, or factory workers, they considered themselves as ministers. When they appeared before their local selective service boards, they requested to be classified as Class IV-D, which would have exempted them from any type of military service. Many local boards, however, did not regard their claims for exemption worthy of consideration. It was with respect to the demands of the Jehovah's Witnesses that the selective service officials in Indiana stated that the most troublesome phase of the whole drafting program was not the conscientious objector, but rather those who claimed exemption or deferment on a ministerial basis, without being able to produce satisfactory evidence to sup-

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6 Ibid., 29. For an interesting narrative dealing with the treatment of a conscientious objector in federal prisons during World War I, read Phillip Grosser, Uncle Sam's Devil's Island (Boston, n.d.).


7 The following selective service classifications were used in this article: I-A, persons available for military service and training; I-A-O, persons available for noncombatant service; IV-D, ministers and divinity students; IV-E, conscientious objectors opposed to both combatant and noncombatant service; IV-F, physically, mentally, or morally unfit. For a complete definition of these classifications, see Selective Service Regulations, February 1, 1942 to February 1, 1948 (2d ed., Washington, 1944), 287.
port their ministerial claims. The end result was that if a Jehovah's Witness would accept nothing but a IV-D classification, the only alternative was prison.

The case of the Jehovah's Witness is a good example of a conscientious objector whose religious claims for exemption did not necessarily classify him as a pacifist. His excuse for violating the law was not opposition to war but rather resistance to any restriction or interference with his witnessing or preaching. As far as he was concerned, there was but one objective and that was to continue his witnessing. In his opinion not even a war should be permitted to interfere with his religious work.

The Friends and the Methodists had the next largest number of church constituents in prison. Among the Methodists and Friends, there were many who listened to their individual consciences. This resulted in a refusal on their part to accept alternate service in the civilian public service camps which had been approved by their denominations. Prison terms for these men, therefore, were usually inevitable. Generally, the conscientious objectors of the Mennonite and Brethren churches accepted the idea of alternate service. Hence, there were fewer members of these peace churches in prison.

Another type of conscientious objector belonged to religious bodies whose formal tenets included opposition to the bearing of arms. Members of this group were willing to enter the armed services, wear the uniform, and do their part in a military organization up to the point of training in arms. They preferred to be classified as noncombatants rather than conscientious objectors, for they considered war as something which they could not prevent, and while believing it was wrong to kill and take part in combat, they could as noncombatant soldiers help to alleviate human suf-

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8 F. Lyle Summers, Selective Service in Indiana, 1940-1947 (A type-written report, Fort Harrison, Indiana, 1947), 117. The selective service system in trying to aid the local boards in this matter issued an opinion as to just how the ministerial status of the Jehovah's Witnesses was to be determined. Selective Service System, National Headquarters Opinions, II, No. 14.

9 Sibley and Wardlaw, Conscientious Objectors in Prison, 24, 25.

10 Ibid., 13, 14. The term "historic peace churches" referred to the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and the Friends.

11 William A. Brown, Church and State in Contemporary America (New York, 1936), 275n.
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ferring. The Seventh-day Adventists are typical of this group.

Still another type or group not only objected to bearing arms but refused any kind of service that was connected with the war effort. They were represented by the historic peace churches whose members for the most part followed the dictates of their conscience and accepted alternate service, which was to be found in the civilian public service camps. Others actually joined the armed forces or took an absolute stand in their conviction. This group included men whose religions justified the stand of the conscientious objector, but whose church tenets did not make such a stand obligatory for their members. The majority of the religious bodies fell in this category. Still another subdivision of this type included those individuals who professed conscientious objection regardless of the fact that their own churches were indifferent toward individual convictions. Some religious organizations which took this attitude of indifference were the Protestant Episcopal church and the Church of Christ, Scientist.

A final type of conscientious objector, although quite in the minority, included those who based their claims for exemption on political grounds or on humanitarian factors. In this group were communists, socialists, and those opposed to certain types of wars based on a defensive or offensive nature.

There was no definite type of conscientious objector. They were like any other American group. Some were from the social register and others from factories and farms. They came in all sizes, shapes, colors, and convictions. As a group they were generally under one classification, yet individually their ideas and beliefs not only caused them to form many smaller factions but often put them in opposition to each other. This diversity among conscientious objectors is not unlike the multiformity of ways used by many in their attempts to reach the Divine Being. Consequently, the government through the selective service system did not recognize all these various types of conscientious objectors as separate groups. It recognized only those who could base

12 Daniel A. Poling in A Preacher Looks at War (New York, 1943), 5, 6, discusses how the various classifications might have been eliminated. D. Elton Trueblood, “The Quaker Way,” Atlantic Monthly (Boston, 1857- ), CLXVI (1940), 740.
their claims on religious grounds, thus setting a standard for government recognition of conscientious objectors.

A few denominations due to the varied interpretations and connotations of the words "pacifist" and "conscientious objector" tried to avoid the use of them in connection with their own beliefs. Some Friends were unwilling to use the label "pacifist" because it lacked a definite meaning. They were much more satisfied with the simple term "Friend," which at least had a fairly definite connotation, as well as a long history to back it up. Among the Mennonites, "non-resistance" was a popular term. They viewed pacifism as a modern philosophy of social and political action. The doctrine of "non-resistance," however, had been followed since the sixteenth century. While both terms are derived from the Bible, the difference or distinction lies in the fact that not everything in the modern pacifist movement is based on Biblical non-resistance. Thus, it can be seen that no one terminology applies to all objectors to war.

Postwar periods in general tend to curtail or decrease church growth, but the effect of World War I on pacifist sentiment was just the opposite. This growth of pacifist sentiment can easily be visualized when one compares the number of church groups represented among the conscientious objectors of World War I with those church groups represented in the civilian public service camps in World War II. There were approximately twenty sects and churches represented in 1918, in spite of the fact that the period before the first World War had been full of peace movements and pacifist demonstrations. During World War II, however, there were over one hundred and twenty sects or religious groups reported by men in the civilian public service program.

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15 The term "conscientious objector" henceforth will refer to all those who were conscientiously opposed to war because of their religious convictions. Any other meanings or connotations will be specifically mentioned.
16 For a graphic picture of this, see "What War does to Church Growth," Time (Chicago, 1923- ), XXXIX (January 26, 1942), 38.
This might indicate an increase in sectarianism rather than pacifism, yet the fact must not be overlooked that among the denominations which had more than one hundred men in the civilian public service camps were Methodists, Presbyterians, Northern Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, who were hardly represented in World War I. The significant thing about this comparison is the increase in the number of conscientious objectors not only in church bodies that practiced the same beliefs toward war in the first World War but also in denominations, especially the larger ones, who had few or hardly any objectors in 1917.17

When the breath of Mars was beginning to be felt in the United States, preparations were made for the inevitable clash. Despite the orations of leading isolationists a majority in Congress passed the first peacetime conscription act in September, 1940. The new conscription act provided a clause for those who were conscientiously opposed to combatant training. Section 5 (g) of the Selective Service Act stated that any person, who “by reason of religious training and belief” was conscientiously opposed to participation in war, could claim exemption from combatant training and service. If the claimant should refuse to take part in “noncombatant service as defined by the President,” he was to be “assigned to work of national importance under civilian direction.”18 The two alternatives offered to the conscientious objector were known as Class I-A-O which recognized those who were willing to render noncombatant service, and Class IV-E, which applied to those who were opposed to both combatant and noncombatant service. These two classes, however, included only those who were supposed to be mentally and physically fit for service. Others, who might have claimed either Class I-A-O or Class IV-E, but who were not mentally or physically up to par, were placed in Class IV-E, where their identity as conscientious objectors was lost.19

The local selective service boards were often in a quandry in their attempts to determine a general basis for exemption on the above grounds. The selective service system in its early history had many regulations in reference to the con-

17 An Introduction to Friends Civilian Public Service (Philadelphia, 1945), 6, and appendix 3.
18 Selective Service Regulations, September 23, 1940 to February 1, 1942 (Washington, 1944), 23.
19 See footnote 7.
scientious objector but nothing concrete enough to be of help to the lower units. Many local boards set up their own standards for religious training and belief which varied. A few discounted all claims of religious objection to war, while others accepted church membership. The result of these conflicting ideas and views was an increase in the number of cases that had to be appealed. F. Lyle Summers, Director of Selective Service in Indiana, stated that in many instances these cases were troublesome to the local boards. Some board members found it difficult to maintain a tolerant attitude toward granting exemption on religious grounds. While the selective service system in Indiana insisted that there was no indication that each and every conscientious objector did not receive his every right, the opinions of some of the latter from Indiana were in conflict with this statement.

The men who were placed in Class IV-E were treated by the selective service system in the same way as were those in Class I-A. In peacetime when the liability for servicemen in Class I-A who were twenty-eight years of age or older was suspended, it also applied to those who were in the same category in Class IV-E. The ruling which permitted the discharge of men from the army who were forty-five years old or over in like manner affected those who were classified as IV-E. When the limited service classification was withdrawn in 1942, the order included all classes which had limited service groups. Class IV-E was one of these.

Conflicting interpretations of the Selective Service Act by leading officials did little to help local boards in forming a basis for conscientious objections. Clarence A. Dykstra, the national director of selective service, pointed out in December, 1940, that the Act provided exemption for those who were conscientiously opposed to war. Membership in a religious sect or organization was not necessary as evi-

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21 Summers, Selective Service in Indiana, 117. E. Lefferson, a conscientious objector from Bloomington, Indiana, mentioned a case to the writer in which a ministerial student from Anderson, Indiana, was not only refused classification as a conscientious objector by his local board but was refused the necessary forms which were provided by the government for conscientious objectors.
22 See footnote 7.
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dence of the sincerity of their convictions. This definition
gave way to another when in 1942, General Lewis B. Hershey,
the new national director of selective service, stated that
he would be satisfied only with objections that were based
on religious training and belief. Thus, as far as the law
was concerned, a conscientious objector had to recognize the
existence of a Divine Being.24 Any other objections that
might be based on the futility or stupidity of war, on social
or economic grounds, or on any other similar reasoning did
not entitle the registrant to exemption. The sincerity of such
convictions in itself could not be grounds for exemption, al-
though it was recognized that a person wishing to be exempt
on religious grounds must be sincere in his beliefs. If the
registrant persisted in his beliefs, which were not recognized
by those in authority, the end result was usually imprison-
ment.

Throughout the United States in 1945, there were 11,480
registrants in Class IV-E and more than fifteen thousand
men had been inducted into Class I-A-O, one of whom re-
ceived the Congressional Medal of Honor.25 Indiana, in June,
1944, had 263 persons registered as I-A-O’s, and 863 regis-
tered as IV-E’s in April, 1945, which figures were the high-
est during the war for these classes in that state. In the
percentage relationship of IV-E’s to all living registrants,
Indiana ranked second in the nation with .15 per cent, where-
as Kansas ranked first with .34 per cent of the total number
registered.26

The civilian public service program, which was the alter-
nate provided for those in Class IV-E, was the result of a
compromise reached by officials of the selective service sys-

24 Sibley and Wardlaw, Conscientious Objectors in Prison, preface.
25 Corporal Desmond T. Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist noncom-
batant medical soldier, was the first conscientious objector (this term
was used by the United States Army in reference to its noncombatants)
to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was credited with
saving the lives of seventy-five wounded Yanks. Selective Service and
Victory, The Fourth Report of the Director of Selective Service (Wash-
ington, 1948), 176-179. For the official press release and the War De-
partment citation, see “Conscientious Objector, Medical Aid Man, Award-
ed Medal of Honor,” The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald (Wash-
ington, 1850- ), CXXII, No. 44 (1945), 2.
26 A letter from the Director of Selective Service to Charles B.
Hirsch, April 5, 1949, gives the figure of 863 Hoosiers in Class IV-E.
Selective Service and Victory, 503, states there were 857. Three states
had a higher number of registrants—Pennsylvania, 1,548; Ohio, 1,439;
and Kansas, 907.
tem and members of the peace churches in 1940. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in an executive order dated December 6, 1940, defined noncombatant training and service as duty in a unit which was unarmed at all times; work in the various echelons of the medical department; and service in any unit or installation which did not require the use of arms in combat or training in their use.27

Aside from the medical department this order provided for the use of noncombatants in the Quartermaster Corps, where they could be used in the bakery, warehouses, and repair shops; in the chemical warfare service where they were restricted to the decontamination units; and also in the Signal and Engineer Corps. In 1943, however, an order was issued which restricted noncombatant service to the Medical Corps.28

While the national government was gradually forming a policy toward the treatment of conscientious objectors, a sampling of public opinion indicated that in general the American people were not hostile to the special classifications for these persons. Over three-fourths of the individuals questioned said that the government should provide wages and allotments not only for the man in Class IV-E but also for his family. Many people favored the principle of alternate service but when it came to allowing the conscientious objectors to proselyte during the war, eighty-seven per cent of the people showed opposition.29 The right to hold a particular belief and the privilege of trying to persuade another to accept it are not the same, especially when proselytizing would weaken the fighting morale of the majority who had been dedicated to winning the war. Activism of this type, if successful on a large scale would greatly interfere with the armed forces of the nation at war. It could even be classified as a direct aid to the enemy. Thus while the conscientious objector was protected by his government, he also had an obligation to it.30

27 Selective Service in Peacetime, 190.
28 Memoranda to All State Directors, September 30, 1940 to October 15, 1943 (Washington, 1945), Memorandum (1-278), dated October 28, 1941; and Local Board Memoranda Nos. 1-195, January 1, 1941 to January 1, 1945 (Washington, 1945), No. 51, which states that "Trainees whose status as conscientious objectors has been established and who are received for processing and assignment will be assigned to medical replacement centers and medical units only."
30 Poling, A Preacher Looks at War, 7.
A poll taken in the Middle West over a period of four years showed a change of sentiment among the people. This can be explained largely by the fact that prior to the war, the Middle West was the stronghold of isolationism. The keep-out-of-war attitude predominated and tended to show a sympathetic feeling toward the conscientious objector who, too, was naturally opposed to the war but for different reasons. Four years later, in 1944, when the country was an active participant in the war and all were urged to do their share toward the war effort, another poll indicated that the middle westerners had changed from the most favorable attitude to conscientious objectors to the least favorable.81

General Hershey said that the civilian public service camps were an experiment which was something new not previously undertaken. He added, “I don’t know whether the experiment will work or not. But I hope and pray that it will.”82 Just how much the general prayed about the matter is open to question, but the experiment was not only started but actually lasted throughout the period of the war. As to whether it was a success is still a debatable question. The great test was to see if American democracy was big enough to preserve the rights of minorities during a time of crisis, and to an extent this was achieved.

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt in answering the question “How do you think our boys who have gone to war and risked their lives should treat conscientious objectors after the war?” replied: “I should think that the boys who go through the war, and who believe in what they are doing, would have a respect for a conscientious objector who had an equally strong belief that he should not kill other people. We have put these conscientious objectors to work in this war. They are clamoring for more dangerous work. Some of them are already doing work which requires great courage, but not the taking of another man’s life. It would certainly seem a curious thing to me if a boy were not able to understand, having had deep convictions himself, that other people have

a right to equally deep convictions and that they should be respected."

The national government in spite of all the problems that confronted it during the war years gave some consideration to the conscientious objector. While it did not grant full recognition of conscience, it did provide for a noncombatant status and an alternate civilian work program which marked a definite advance as compared to the provisions made during World War I. The fact that the United States gave more consideration to the conscientious objector may be sufficient evidence that it was attempting to protect the American heritage of religious freedom. According to polls taken, Indiana and the Middle West did not give their full support to the maintenance of freedom of conscience during World War II.

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