

NON-Resistant Groups in World War I.

The long time enjoyment of the privileges of peace and exemption from military service, as granted to our people during more than century, came to a sudden termination in the Autumn of 1917. The long time enjoyment of that peace and assurance of our peaceful profession and its practice in a land which had given promise of continued recognition to such a faith was momentarily dissipated.

In the Spring of 1917 the United States, having entered into the European strife, passed the Army Draft Bill to make up its quota of troops to carry out its obligations to other nations, in the struggle. The Canadian people were given assurance that only voluntary service was accepted in the Canadian army. But in August of that same year the Military Service Bill was adopted by the Canadian Government. It was then that our people became much disturbed, owing to several clauses in the bill which affected those persons whose faith forbid military service. One clause provided that such persons were excepted from the provisions of the Act. Another clause provided exemption from combatant service for such persons. Since there was no immediate call for enlistments and no class was called until October of that year, our people were not too much disturbed. But there was a continual uneasiness in the ranks of all lest the professed provisions for recognition of our faith should be misunderstood or disregarded in making up sufficient forces for military service.

None of our people had been alerted up to the time of November, 1917. Many felt assured that there would be no call made on our young men for military service. In view of this fact, a meeting was called in Markham, at which the following persons were present. -L. J. Burkholder, Isaac Wambold, Christian Gayman, Levi Grove, Thomas Reesor, Samuel Goudie, H. Sievenpiper and Milton Bricker, of the three groups of the Mennonite Faith, and Fred Elliot and D. W. Heise of the Tunker Brethren. This unofficial meeting was

called together by L. J. Burkholder to "Consider ways and means by which the Non-Resistant bodies which they represent as officials might be able to express in some practical way to the military representatives of Canada, their profound gratitude and appreciation for the enjoyment of exemption privileges relieving them from the performance of any class of military service."

The Non-Resistant Relief Organization.

L. J. Burkholder was chosen as Chairman of the provisional meeting and D. W. Heise was chosen as Secretary of what later became officilly, the Non-Resistant Relief Movement of Ontario, on Dec. 11, 1917. Some discussion regarding the status of the Non-Resistant groups occurred at the first meeting, it being felt that there was room for suspicion at least that their security after all was not absolute. A committee, with S. Goudie as Chairman, ~~E. Sievenpiper~~ L. J. Burkholder, E. Sievenpiper, Thos Heesor and Fred Elliott was other members, was appointed to "investigate the present situation, and if possible learn what the Statutes of the said bodies really is relative to the said exemption matter, and call a meeting in the near future, and provide for the meeting an official name." This meeting was held on Dec. 11, 1917 at which time the official name was adopted.

This meeting also called for the appointment of three representatives of each of the participating groups as delegates to the next meeting of organization, and planning for the proposed object of the previous meeting.

Based on the Statutes of Canada, which provided exemption from all military service, with the assurance that the present act would not contravene those statutes, the meeting to "Recommend that a generous fund be raised among the Churches interested which shall be donated to the Government as a memorial of appreciation for the privilege of religious liberty and freedom from military service, which fund shall be used for relief and charitable purposes. A committee to be appointed which shall interview the Government for suggestions as to how the disposal of the said donations according to our faith." The Committee appointed was L. J. Burkholder,

S. Goudie, D.W. Heise, Thos. Reesor, C. Gascho and S.F. Coffman. This Committee was later reduced to three persons, as per meeting of Mar. 29, 1918. -S.F. Coffman, D.W. Heise and Thos. Reesor. This committee had its first meeting with members of the Government at Ottawa on March 27th 1918. Hon. F.S. Scott of South Waterloo, and Hon. J. A. Caulder, Saskatchewan, then Minister of Immigration and Colonization, Hon. Arthur Meighan Minister of the Interior, Col. Mewburn, Minister of Militia and Hon. N.W. Rowell, President of the Council were appointed to meet the Committee. Only Mr. Scott and Mr. Caulder, were available since it was the last session of Parliament before the Easter recess.

Our committee presented our petition, asking for advice as to our procedure, and the proper application of the funds for relief purposes. The committee also presented a statement showing how there seems to be a conflict between our non-resistant faith and the provisions of the Military Service Act, and requesting some statement or action on the part of the Government more clearly defining our standing and privileges. A report from the Government was promised, and the committee assured that our interests would not be disregarded, and that our complete exemption from military service would be allowed.

Communications with the Government.

Because of many persons carrying on personal communications with members of the Government and resultant confusion of reports and varying opinions, the Meeting of June 20th, 1918, appointed one person to take care of the official correspondence between the Government and representatives of the various Church districts. S. F. Coffman was asked to care for such correspondence and was asked to deal with the Government through its members. Mr. S. F. Scott of Galt and Mr. W.G. Weichel of Waterloo. At this time a circular letter was prepared by S.F. Coffman and D.W. Heise and sent to all of the congregations urging the contribution of funds to make up the memorial to the Government.

At the regular meeting of October 20th, 1918 the executive Committee of the organization was instructed to contribute relief funds to such projects as The Merchant Sailors' Relief of Canada, and various reconstruction and relief projects in Belgium and France and other countries. The same meeting gave consideration to the request of the Government for personal loans from our members. The following action was taken. "That we show our loyalty and appreciation towards the Government by subscribing for bonds under the conditions that, (1) That the money loaned, or its equivalent, be used only in the purchase of food stuffs or for relief. (2) That the application forms used by our people shall be stamped, stating the purpose for which the money is loaned. (3) That the bonds shall bear a stamp indicating the special projects for which the money is loaned. a further resolution was passed by this meeting which is noteworthy.

"That members in the bodies represented in this Organization shall be at liberty to act upon their own convictions in this matter, and that those who subscribe for bonds shall not be deemed to have in anywise prejudiced their rightful claims for exemption from the performance of military service by so doing, or to have compromised their principles. And, that any who decline the purchase of bonds shall be deemed to have acted upon their personal convictions, and not that of the bodies represented, and shall not be censured for their action."

The action of the Organization was duly reported to the proper Government officials. The final contribution of the congregations for relief were also reported to the Government after the Executive meeting of Jan. 7th 1919. The sum of \$69,535.00 had been contributed and was disbursed through Merchant Sailors' Relief, The Soldiers' Aid Commission for Ontario, for the care of and education of Soldiers' children. Belgium Relief, Relief in France Armenian Relief and Canadian Serbian Relief.

The Military Service Act.

Notwithstanding the frequent communications with the departments

of the Government at Ottawa, the outworking of the Military Service Act produced many complications. The intention of the Government was that it should work smoothly and have but one interpretation. But the method of carrying out the registration of those eligible for service and decisions as to the eligibility of exemptions was placed in the hands of men of various types localities and opinions. The Local tribunals were composed of local men with a local or district judge and persons approved by the Government.

The Military Service Act came into force August 29th, 1917. All classes called under this proclamation came at once under the control of the military department of the Government. Although, as stated in the proclamation, "the selection of the men and the dealing with questions of exemption are in the hands of the Civil Authorities." "It is not until the men are actually called to colours that the Military Department intervenes."

The provisions for exemption were ^{eight} five in number. One clause in the Act stated the "Exceptions to the Act." It included those persons who, upon Orders in Council, of 1873, were granted the privilege of total exemption from all military service. The Mennonites from Russia and the Doukhobors who also came from Russia. Persons belonging to those groups were not obliged to register for service or to claim exemptions.

The one particular clause under which our non-resistant groups were obliged to apply for exemption from military service was as follows. - "That he conscientiously objects to the undertaking of combatant service and is prohibited from so doing by tenets and articles of faith, in effect on the sixth day of July, 1917, of any organized religious denomination existing and well recognized in Canada at such date, and to which he in good faith belongs."

It is rather difficult to explain why such a basis for our exemption should have been made, since our Conference had at several previous dates

sent to the Government at Ottawa a statement of our faith, in which we had set forth our standing as opposed to war in every form. The statutes of Canada had defined our faith and given us exemptions from all military service in every enactment from 1808 to 1906.

The first meeting of members of our Committee was with the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden and Honorable Arthur Meighen. at Ottawa Oct. 11 1917. This was a personal Conference after handing to them a statement of our faith and our request for proper exemptions. A copy of the letter to Mr. Meighen follows.-

"Honourable Sir:- Allow me to again express our appreciation for the courtesy extended to our delegation today by yourself and the Honourable Sir Robert Borden, and for the favorable consideration of our position regarding participation in war in any form. We have the confidence that our interests are well guarded and that we also may prove ourselves worthy citizens in our humble capacity. The following advice is being given to our ministers regarding the questions considered in our conference today.

1. All of our members who are in the age limit liable for military service, when called must apply for exemption according to Government regulations.
2. Physical examination before the medical Board is not required for those who apply for exemption for conscientious reasons.
3. None of our members are expected to vote under the present elections act. Those who do so forfeit their right to exemption.
4. Non-combatant service will be dealt with later should circumstances require it.

The above statement was acknowledged by Mr. Meighen. ~~and~~

As soon as our young men began registering and making application for exemption from military service on Conscientious grounds, all seeking total exemption, the local Tribunals began rendering their decisions, as they thought, based solely on the statutes, granting exemptions only from "Combatant service," as Mennonites.

At the request of the Committee a letter was addressed to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden on October 22, 1917. It is as follows.-
"Honourable Sir:- Kindly allow me, as the representative of the Mennonite Church of Ontario, the A.

Church of Ontario, the Alberta Saskatchewan Conference and other congregations of like faith with us, to address you with reference to the recent proclamation calling out the men in class I as described by the Military Service Act, and also with regard to the proposed regulations as referred to in the daily papers. of October 18.

"The recent proclamation deems all men called "To be soldiers in the military service of Canada, save as the said Act otherwise provided" It seems that this proviso exempts from "combatant service" only, the adherents of religious denominations whose creed forbids "combatant" service, and holds ^{them} for "Noncombatant service" as soldiers "On leave of absence without pay." In this respect the proclamation seems to us to contravene the articles of faith of our Church, and its members would thus be made to transgress its principles and practices which have been maintained during the centuries past.

"In view of the fact that the Government considers the members of our Churches eligible for non-combatant service and ~~that~~ states the position of non-resistant Churches as opposed to "combatant" service, we beg that our position be regarded in the light of the Statement of our Position which was placed in the hands of the Government along with our ^{petition} ~~petition~~ of October 11th, in which it is stated that "we cannot participate in war in any form; that is, to aid or abet war whether in combatant or non-combatant capacity."

The Government has already given recognition to those principles which we hold as vital to our faith and life as followers of Christ, in exempting from the Military Service Act certain religious bodies, the first of which mentioned were granted total exemption by Order in Council as a result of our having enjoyed such exemption under the Government of Canada. Our claims for total exemption are identical with those of the one class excepted from the Act, being based on the same articles of faith of the Mennonite Church.

" We realize that conditions are such that the Government feels the necessity of taking exceptional means in order to meet the needs of all. We have born and are willing to bear and share in the burdens and privations that all are experiencing, and we feel that that it has not been the purpose of the Government to impose on any of its citizens the most grievous sorrows of being deprived of those religious liberties which have been confirmed to them during other trying ~~times~~ periods in the history of Canada; but military duty under the military arm of the Government would mean to us an exceptional hardship and would not be in harmony with the recognition accorded our people in the past.

"The Canadian Press despatches of Canada of October 18th state that in new regulations to be issued shortly, "A Local Tribunal is not to allow an application for exemption on conscientious grounds unless the applicant signifies in writing his willingness to perform, when required, non-combatant work or service, including service in the Army Medical Corps, the Army Service Corps and Mechanical Transport." This may be an erroneous statement or interpretation. In case any such attestation should be required of any member of the Mennonite Church it would be understood by the Church to be equivalent to a voluntary enlistment in the army service and hence a denial of the profession of his faith which he holds as vital to his spiritual well-being and eternal salvation. It is understood that we do not consider non-combatant service an alternative for combatant service, for our people, since we esteem them both as service in the army which is organized for the prosecution of war. We most earnestly desire that no such attestation shall be expected of any member of our Churches.

By the Elections Act our members are disfranchised, temporarily; by the Military Service Act they are partially exempted from service. While we feel that there is an inequality between the sacrifice of privilege and the service demanded, we do not wish to hold this against the Government;

we but desire that there be a uniform recognition of our faith. We do not ask for enfranchisement at this time, since matters of war are inconsistent with our faith; we ask only that we enjoy that which it has evidently been the purpose of the Government to grant us,- freedom from military service.

"I" our recent interview, Honourable Sir Robert, and with yourself and the Honourable Arthur Meighen, then Secretary of State, the question of non-combatant service was brought to our attention. It was then advised that the matter be held in abeyance until such a time as when such service would be called for, and, at such a time our people would again be consulted regarding such service. In recent governmental changes these matters may have been overlooked. Our people are complying with the regulations for claiming exemption. The vital issue is, that, when they appear before the exemption tribunals with proper credentials from ministers and bishops, they shall be required to attest for army service under of a non-combatant character, and under the rules of the Church they shall not be able to do so. We trust that this will receive the earnest consideration of yourself and of your Government, and that there may be at that time no occasion for friction between our Government and our young men who are members of the Church.

We desire to do no act that may be construed as insubordination, rebellion or disloyalty in any form. We have always endeavored to prove ourselves as worthy ^{and} ~~citizens~~-honorable citizens of this land, endeavoring by our honest labors and faithful duties to support the nation and its laws respecting our law-makers and rulers. It is our desire to continue to respect and honor our Government and to bear our part of the nation's burdens, feeling that it is not the cost of our blood and life that withholds us from sharing in in the military burden, but rather that there are other ^{orthy} ~~ways~~ services in which we may conscientiously and effectively engage for the welfare ~~and~~ of our country and fellow-men while faithfully following the teachings and example of Christ our lord." ----- Committee.

The letter to the Prime Minister was acknowledged on Oct 31, 1917 by the Parliamentary Secretary of State for External Affairs, who wrote, - "I have received your letter of October 22nd addressed to the Prime Minister, asking that members of the Mennonite Church of Ontario and others of like faith, be exempted from non-combatant war service .

At the request of the Prime Minister, I am bringing the matter to the attention of the Chairman of the Military Service Council, from whom you will no doubt hear in due course. " (Signed, Hugh Clark.)

The Department of Justice Office replied on November 3rd, 1917, as follows, -

"Sir, - With further reference to your letter of the 22nd Ult. addressed to the Right Honorable, the Prime Minister of Canada, I have to inform you that under paragraph 7 of the Schedule of Exceptions to the above Act, Mennonites are excluded from the operation of the Act and have no duty to perform thereunder.

"In a former letter to the - an adherent of your Sect. I suggested that any Mennonite might claim exemption on the ground of his being excluded by paragraph 7, with a view to relieving him of any annoyance which might be caused by prosecution after the 10th instant for non-compliance with the Act, the production of the counterfoil being sufficient answer to any inquiry. Since expressing that opinion the matter has been thoroughly discussed by the Military Service Council and the opinion now is that if Mennonites should be prosecuted for non-compliance with the Act, the answer to the prosecutor would be that they are Mennonites, and on the proof of the fact, undoubtedly the prosecution would be dismissed..

"I think this fully covers the content of your letter and your mind may rest now be at rest on the whole subject." - (Signed, - E. L. Newcombe, Deputy Minister of Justice.)

Another letter, setting forth the particular faith which we profess, and stating our affiliation with the General Conference statement adopted at the Yellow Creek Church, Indiana, Aug. 29, 1917, was sent to the

Minister of Justice and the Chief Justice Duff. This letter followed much after the plan of the General Conference statement and was signed by the deputation of the Mennonite Church,

L.J. Birkholder, Moderator
David Bergey, Secretary,
S.F. Coffman,
Anson Groh.

The Statement was also signed by representatives of the Amish Mennonite Congregations of Waterloo, Oxford and Perth Counties, who were in perfect accord with it and joined in the petition for a continuance of the recognition of our faith by the present Government. It was signed by

Christian Gascho,
Jacob R. Bender,
Jacob S. Bender
Samuel Bender.