

Making a Case for Non-combatant Service: B. B. Janz's Negotiations with the Government During World War II

Abe J. Dueck, *Centre for MB Studies*

The history of Mennonite negotiations with the Canadian government regarding their nonresistant position and exemption from military and/or alternative service in the period before and during World War II has been told in considerable detail by a number of writers. The issues and developments are summarized with respect to the different immigrant groups in the third volume of *Mennonites in Canada*, written by Ted Regehr.¹ Other studies focus on particular themes and issues during this critical period.² It might appear that the sources have been studied adequately and that there is little potential for new light or additional perspectives on the issues or personalities involved. However, the extent of unutilized material available is such that it is still possible to garner a better understanding of these developments.³ This paper will focus on the period from late 1940 to the summer of 1941, which was the critical period of negotiations with the government concerning the drafting of policies related to Mennonites and other conscientious objectors.

The main personalities involved in the negotiations with the government after the outbreak of World War II were the eight delegates who met with government officials in November 1940, on behalf of the Ontario and western Mennonites. The Ontario representatives included E. J. Swalm, J. B. Martin, Fred Haslam, and J. H. Janzen. The western group of delegates included David Toews, J. Gerbrand, C. F. Klassen, and B. B. Janz. Each of these in turn represented particular groups of Mennonites, each with their own perspectives and history. Biographies of some of these delegates have been written.⁴ These include some references to the nature of negotiations with the government, usually in a very cursory manner.⁵ The unique perspective and role of Janz has been noted, especially by his biographer, but even that account is also somewhat brief.⁶ Furthermore, a number of Janz's

letters to a select group of western leaders give a much more intimate picture of the dilemma which Janz faced and his own point of view and role during these crucial times.

As is well known, Mennonites in Canada as a whole were divided in their understanding of what their belief in nonresistance implied in practical terms. Did it mean that they should refuse to do any form of alternative service, whether under military or civilian supervision, regardless of whether or not it was directly connected with the war? Or was alternative service an appropriate option and, if so, could it include ambulance service or other efforts to restore the wounded on the battlefield, possibly in the medical corps of the army?

Related to the above, was the question of what kinds of exemption the government had promised to different groups of Mennonites when they arrived in Canada. There were essentially three groups, and each had come under different circumstances and provisions. The first group, which consisted mainly of Ontario Mennonites who had come to Canada from the United States before 1870, had been given exemption from active military service, but not necessarily from alternative service or payment of taxes. The second group of Mennonites had arrived in Canada from Russia in the 1870s and had been promised an absolute exemption from military service, but it was not clear whether they could be required to render other forms of service. Finally, a third and larger group of Mennonites who had migrated to Canada in the 1920s were told that the exemptions of 1873 would not apply to them, that some form of alternative service might be required, but that they would be exempt from military service. In Russia this group had already experienced similar provisions, including service in forestry camps and, during World War I, in Red Cross medical, ambulance, and first aid services as well as on hospital trains and in military hospitals.⁷

With the war clouds forming in the 1930s, Mennonites on both sides of the border began to prepare themselves. An important meeting of Mennonite representatives took place in Winkler on 15 May 1939. This group sought to find common ground in their approach to government, but the meeting ended in failure. Three distinct approaches were represented. The conservative groups in western Canada insisted that they were not required to do any alternative service and therefore they did not need to negotiate with the government. The other two groups, though also not in agreement, still continued to hope that a common approach might be developed.⁸

Although the war broke out in September 1939, there was no immediate crisis and it was not clear how the government would deal with conscientious objectors. But the course of the war in the early months of 1940 forced the government to prepare legislation for conscription.

The most critical period in the negotiations with government officials came in the fall of 1940 and continued until the summer of 1941. It is this period that is the central focus of this paper.

By 1940 work was underway in Ottawa to draft a National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) which would govern the conscription procedures. Mennonites were already under considerable pressure in society because of what was perceived as a lack of patriotism and their pro-Germanism. In June two churches in Alberta were burned as a result of arson, and there were many other attempts to intimidate the Mennonites and to pressure the government not to grant favorable treatment to them. Sensing the approaching crisis, a Mennonite delegation headed to Ottawa to meet with Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King on 10 June. The delegation clearly stated the conviction of Mennonites, affirming their willingness to alleviate human suffering but not to bear arms or to kill. The Prime Minister assured them that their wishes would be honored. The specific rules would be announced once the NRMA was finalized.

The NRMA was approved in June, but the implications for Mennonites were not yet clear. It did require the registration of all young men between the ages of 16 and 60 but promised exemption from bearing arms for Mennonites. The process of registration was soon underway, but among Mennonites there was a lot of confusion about how they should respond and whether all Mennonites were subject to the same rules. Section 17 dealt with the 1873 immigrants who were granted indefinite postponement. The others were covered in Section 18 which, although granting postponement, left open the possibility of being called to non-combatant duty, possibly under military authority.⁹ Among the other issues that created confusion were the questions of who was defined as a Mennonite, who was covered in which category, and how young men would qualify – as groups belonging to the Mennonite church, or as individuals as a result of court hearings. It soon became evident that the interpretation of rules depended on the regional authorities and therefore the application of the rules varied dramatically. In Manitoba, Judge John E. Adamson subjected the conscientious objectors to rigorous and intimidating interrogation. In Alberta, a large number of applicants had their claims rejected. A similar situation pertained in British Columbia.

In Ontario the Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren in Christ formed the Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC) on 22 July 1940. Individuals in Ontario usually had less difficulty when they registered as members of this body. On 8 October the CHPC drew up a plan called the Christian Fellowship Service (CFS) which postulated a variety of types of alternative service to be administered by the CHPC. In western Canada meetings were held on 14 October in Winnipeg and

again 22 October in Saskatoon, but the two groups could not establish common ground. The conservative groups established an Elders Committee. The other western groups sought to develop a proposal which would include medical or ambulance work at the front, preferably under Red Cross supervision. They felt that this would not compromise their nonresistant position and that it would show that they were not trying to avoid danger and were willing to risk their lives. This could also mute the hostility which was directed against them by so much of the public.

Early in September, David Toews had already informed the eastern Mennonites that the Mennonites in the west might be willing to accept some form of non-combatant service in the medical corps. The eastern leaders were anxious to avoid any split between the two groups when they appeared before government officials and therefore invited the western delegates to come to Waterloo before traveling to Ottawa.¹⁰ At a meeting on 5 November they appeared to reach relative consensus on the nature of their request to Ottawa—it should be of a non-military nature with other conditions spelled out in a way that satisfied both groups.

After the meeting J. H. Jansen discovered that Janz apparently had agreed to non-combatant training in military camps with the Alberta officials in Edmonton.¹¹ Some hectic consultations followed with Martin and E. J. Swalm. Swalm sent a telegram to David Toews pleading that he join the delegation in Ottawa in the hope that his presence could counter the influence that Janz might have. Despite his reluctance, therefore, Toews did make his way to Ottawa.

On 7 November, however, Janz, sent a letter to Chief Justice H. Harvey, Chairman of the Board of National War Services in Alberta. This letter was sent from Waterloo. In the letter Janz specified the six conditions which the western Mennonites had agreed to in Saskatoon. These included in particular the request for alternative service in “forestry, first aid, ambulance and hospital work or any other form . . . without the bearing of arms.”¹² It also indicated that this was to be done under civilian authorities, that first aid training be given in lieu of military training, and that the young men be certified by church authorities and not be expected to appear personally to defend their position. The provision that alternative service was to be done under civilian authorities was obviously changed from his earlier statement because of the Waterloo meeting. Janz wrote to Chief Justice Harvey: “In our conversations in Edmonton I did not think of all the various factors pertaining to such a service.” He continued: “A different way of service of our young men in Alberta from the rest of the Mennonites in Canada would be the concern of our churches at home and also would have an undesirable effect on our joint efforts to attain uniformity of

procedure.” In Russia, he said, ambulance and hospital work had been done under a civilian board, and the Alberta congregations were united with those of other provinces on this issue.¹³

On 12-13 November the four representatives of the CHPC and the four western representatives arranged to meet in Ottawa and seek to present a compromise proposal to government officials. The two groups met separately at first and then met together. They agreed on the essentials of the Ontario plan which included offering medical help but not under military supervision or service at the front. The Ontario representatives had already submitted their document on October 16.¹⁴ The entire group then met with the two deputy ministers of national war services, T.C. Davis and L.R. Lafleche, on 12 November. The western representatives, in the presence of the Ontario representatives, presented an 8-point document which included medical service “in the event of epidemics or other emergency resulting from the war,” but not under military supervision.¹⁵ The ministers were not impressed with the plan and suggested non-combatant service under military control but in civilian clothes. It should be noted, however, that the military leaders were by no means in favor of having non-combatant units under their control. Young men who refused to bear arms could have an adverse effect on others and could also hinder the effectiveness of their operations. On 13 November the entire delegation presented a second plan which was reduced to five points, leaving out the provision of medical service entirely.¹⁶ This was clearly also unacceptable to the government officials and they were also unwilling to grant exemption on the basis of prepared lists.

It was at this point that B.B. Janz emerged as a strong promoter of another alternative, much to the chagrin of some of the other members of the delegation, particularly the Ontario representatives. While the documents and correspondence of the following days which scholars have utilized have delineated the main course of developments, the details of Janz’s activities and the deep convictions which guided his actions have not been fully explored. Six lengthy confidential letters, written between 15 and 26 November to a select number of western leaders, document in detail the circumstances and issues that troubled Janz during this critical time.¹⁷ No reference to these letters appears in the studies by William Janzen, Ted Regehr, and John B. Toews.

Janz was the leader of the group of Mennonites who had fled the Soviet Union in the 1920s and had had extensive experience in difficult negotiations with government officials. He was also a representative of Mennonites who had become used to a system of alternative service such as forestry service and, during WWI, service that included ambulance work and other medical work at the front under the auspices of the Red Cross. This experience is central to understanding the

orientation of the largest group of Mennonites in western Canada, and went directly counter to the historical forces which had shaped the orientation of most of the other western Canadian Mennonites, most of whom had left Russia in the 1870s, in part because of the demands which the state was placing on them including some form of alternative service. Janz was also the leader of the Alberta Mennonite groups and was simultaneously dealing with the war services office in Edmonton regarding specific concerns emerging out of the treatment of young men in Alberta. The one other western delegate whose background was similar to Janz's, was Cornelius F. Klassen, who was also Mennonite Brethren and was extensively involved in refugee issues such as the *Reiseschuld*, the 1920s refugee travel debt.

The two other western delegates were David Toews of Rosthern, Saskatchewan and J.J. Gerbrandt of Drake, Saskatchewan, both members of the Canadian Mennonite Conference (CMC). Toews's role in facilitating the immigration of the 1920s in Canada is well known. With respect to his position on alternative service, it appears that he was basically in support of Janz, although he was more concerned about a broadly-based Mennonite approach.¹⁸ Gerbrandt, like Toews, had come to Saskatchewan from the United States in the early part of the century.¹⁹ Toews and Gerbrandt, therefore, lacked the Russian experience, although many Mennonites in their constituency were also *Russländer*. It was the two Mennonite Brethren representatives from western Canada, therefore, who most directly represented the *Russländer* point of view. Jansen, also a *Russländer*, was personally more open but worked in close cooperation with his fellow Ontario delegates.

The sequence of events during the next several weeks was particularly revealing and demonstrated the very sensitive nature of the issues as the various parties struggled to come to some acceptable agreement with the government. As already indicated, the initial meeting of the eight delegates with the government officials on 12 and 13 November was very disappointing to all. Janz was deeply concerned not only about the issue of medical or hospital work, but also about the government's unwillingness to grant exemptions on the basis of lists prepared by the churches. The process of having to appear before boards or individual authorities to answer questions could be very intimidating to young men and might make them fall victim to the whims of individuals who were very antagonistic in the first place.

On 14 November Janz again met with LaFleche and presented a revised proposal to him.

The main points (out of a total of 9) of his proposal included the following: 1 Provision for first aid, ambulance and hospital work; 2) A 30-day first aid course training in camps free of other recruits; 3)

Preparations of lists by the churches; 4) Training under the Red Cross with the possibility of special uniforms; 5) Overseas service only on a voluntary basis; 6) An agreement that the men should always be unarmed and could not be transferred to active or overseas service.²⁰

Janz characterized this as a strengthening of the original proposal,²¹ but it was obviously not regarded that way by others. Fransen characterizes this proposal as essentially a call for “self-contained Mennonite *Sanitätsdienst*-type units with no objection to their being under military supervision.”²² However, this is not quite accurate since Janz was calling for Red Cross supervision. In his report concerning the meetings, Jacob Janzen wrote that Janz’s decision to remain in Ottawa and to work toward resolving the issue of lists or to work under the Red Cross was hurtful to those with a tender conscience.²³ The Ontario leaders feared that Janz might set a precedent which could result in hardship and persecution for other Mennonites. They pleaded with him to desist or at least to wait. In parentheses, the report states that in the meantime a letter had arrived indicating that Janz had met with LaFleche and had reached an agreement which went counter to their earlier proposals. This was obviously not the case.

Janz, for his part, had a very different perspective. On 14 November he wrote to selected leaders (J.H. Jansen, C.F. Klassen, H.H. Janzen, and D.H. Koop) stating: “I regretted that no one was willing to remain with me and I felt bad. But it was obvious that the decisive moment had arrived – if there was to be provision for *Sanitätsdienst*, then now was the time.”²⁴ Janz then reported in detail about how the minister had responded to each of the nine points. The main problems cited by LaFleche were the unconditional acceptance of prepared lists and supervision by the Red Cross. The Red Cross and other agencies were not permitted at the front.

Janz was troubled by the result. He had tried to abide by or even strengthen the 12 November proposal. Now things looked different. What should he do now?²⁵

At noon a telegraph arrived from C. F. Klassen in Windsor: “Please don’t interfere until meeting Tuesday.” Janz showed this to the General who offered to telegraph Klassen, assuring the easterners that Janz’s proposals would in no way jeopardize their earlier proposal. They would each take their separate course. Janz, in the meantime, should make corrections and submit a revised proposal to him. Janz then concluded, “What do you say, please?” It appears that Janz was very uncertain about where this might lead. On 18 November, David Toews wrote to Janz admonishing him to abide with the consensus of 13 November.²⁶

A series of letters to western leaders in Alberta followed from 15-26 November.²⁷ On 15 November Janz wrote that General LaFleche

had regretted that a *Sanitätsdienst* had been removed from the 13 November proposal. Janz also worried about the insistence on individual hearings. The result might be that young men would be recruited as messengers at the front, and that this would involve direct support of killing and destruction. He had warned his brothers about the possible consequences, but they had felt that the provincial boards would help regulate matters. In Alberta, he said, the direction toward a *Sanitätsdienst* had been struck – should that now be abandoned? He was sorry that this was causing division, but he could not help it. In another letter (November 18) he wrote that the order given by fellow delegates to refrain from further activity had caused him much grief in subsequent days. Nonetheless he had not met with the General again.

The following Sunday he attended a service at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and was greatly blessed by the sermon entitled, “Is God the Great Absentee?” Lying awake the next night he felt the urge to visit Senator Buchanan (Lethbridge) and MPs Tucker (Rosthern) and Winkler (Manitoba). In order to avoid being directly connected with the military it might be possible to serve under the Red Cross in various hospitals across the country. His conversations the next day were not encouraging. He listened to some of the sessions in Parliament and worried about what might become of the Mennonite question. Should he proceed with his appointment to see the General and submit the revised proposals as suggested by LaFleche? He had not yet attempted to revise anything. Nevertheless he felt he should go and explain his dilemma. He did not want to cause division among the Mennonites and he was worried that his action might cause persecution for those who did not agree with him. The General listened but did not commit himself. He advised Janz to inform his fellow delegates that the issue was urgent and needed to be resolved soon, although not within a week, and he did not want this to be seen as a pressure tactic. The proposal regarding work in Red Cross hospitals was not well received because it would not involve the same degree of risk as those who worked at the front.

The concluding paragraph revealed Janz’s deep despair. It was possible, he lamented, that if the issue would arise in Parliament, serious objections would be encountered. (*Es ist ja denkbar, wenn im Parliament diese Frage kommt, dasz dann heftige Bremsen angelegt werden.*) If only the issue had been resolved much earlier! Finally, he stated: “It is a bitter pill for me that although I have always in principle defended nonresistance and today continue to be opposed to killing, that I now should become the instrument for induction into the forces.” (*Es ist mir so bitter, dasz ich, der prinzipiell bestimmt immer fuer die Wehrlosigkeit eingetreten bin und auch heute gegen Toeten so stehe,*

dasz ich nun die Bewegung fuer Eingliederung ins Heer einleiten soll.) He feared that the authorities would discover all kinds of ways to get at the Mennonites.

On 19 November Janz wrote that he had officially submitted the revised proposal for the *Sanitätsdienst* to General LaFleche, essentially in its earlier form.²⁸ It was signed by Janz as Chair of Alberta Mennonite Committee for Services and Chair of the Peace Problems Committee of Mennonite Brethren Conference of Canada. The reference to the Red Cross was changed to the “Medical or Ambulance authorities.” The term “badge” also appeared in parentheses indicating that the young men could wear a badge. Otherwise Janz had not heeded the General’s recommendations. The General, on seeing the document, had assured Janz that he would try his best and asked whether Janz’s friends would be coming to Ottawa.

Janz continued to worry about public reaction to the issue. The public was complaining that the Mennonites and their young men had been sitting at home during the last war, had built lavishly and prospered, had married and become respected people, while the English young men had been penniless and had often come home sick and wasted. Would this be repeated? If only the young men had demonstrated that it was really an issue of conscience and faith for them. But nine of ten youths in Manitoba did not even attend church. If only one could speak directly to the young men, but the old men stood in the way. Janz had pondered whether the right procedure might be to agree to personal examinations of the young men. But the examinations would be public and if a particular youth had little to say the judge might simply bow to public pressure and act according to his own prejudices.

Janz suggested two types of medical service to the General, one with the army at the front and the other in hospitals at home. The latter was not acceptable. Janz then gave four reasons why he had submitted the proposal. It was basically because he was convinced that the alternative would be much worse and the public outcry would result in much hardship for the Mennonites.²⁹

On 19 November C. F. Klassen and J. B. Martin arrived in Ottawa again and further discussions took place with LaFleche relating to Janz’s submission as well as the earlier proposals. Since principle issues were at stake they decided to invite the other eastern leaders to Ottawa for a meeting on 22 November.

Friday, 22 November was a critical day. Lafleche had indicated that the issue had to be decided that week. When Martin met Swalm at the Canadian National Railway station he exclaimed, “Swalm, the fat’s in the fire! Janz has committed himself to non-combatant service.”³⁰ The other members from the east were J. H. Janzen, Fred Haslam and J. Harold Sherk. They met with Janz that morning and tensions

were high. Neither side was willing to compromise. Janz felt that the Ontario delegates would feel differently if they had to endure the hostility that the westerners, especially Albertans, had to endure. In the end, the group allowed Janz to continue as a member of the delegation to meet LaFleche in the afternoon.³¹

The meeting did not go well – none of the parties were willing to compromise and there were some heated exchanges with LaFleche.³² After the meeting the delegates decided to seek a meeting with the Minister, J. G. Gardiner. They prepared a joint statement which reiterated their earlier proposals and added that while some members of the churches might be willing to undertake ambulance work under military supervision, the majority would not and therefore they requested that a civilian service be provided. According to their report, although Gardiner was noncommittal, he seemed sympathetic to the idea of civilian service.³³

Janz again reported his perspective of events to his western leaders on 23 November.³⁴ Jansen, he said, had indicated that there were young men in his church who would also be willing to do ambulance and medical service under army supervision. Only Martin had stated that such action would result in automatic excommunication.

The tide began to turn, however. The meeting with Gardiner went well, at least from the perspective of the easterners. Service under civilian authority emerged as an option. Janz ended the letter stating, “New hope.” But it still left him dissatisfied. He, this time joined by C. F. Klassen, decided to remain in Ottawa to plead for a medical corps option under military authority. He was also still very concerned that exemptions be granted on the basis of lists and that the young men be together in larger groups to allow for adequate spiritual supervision. Another issue was the purchasing of war bonds and the two men were able to negotiate an alternative consisting of non-interest bearing Certificates. Janz met with LaFleche several more times. He confessed that these visits to the General were increasingly difficult for him and required much prayer and inner fortitude.³⁵ Janz was informed that LaFleche had received many petitions from various organizations, some vigorously opposed to any special privileges for Mennonites. Among these was a protest from the Lethbridge Board of Trade. The General, however, seemed prepared to recommend something along the lines that Janz requested. The General was also willing to compromise to some degree on the issue of lists. Janz appeared satisfied when the two parted company on 26 November. But on meeting with Klassen shortly thereafter, new information revealed that serious problems were being encountered in various places, particularly the summons of a young man near Brandon who was to appear before Judge Adamson to justify his claim as a conscientious objector.

After another meeting with officials on 30 November, Janz finally left Ottawa on 1 December. He had been away for almost a month. While on the train he wrote several letters. One of them was written to the Board of National War Services in Edmonton pleading the case of several Alberta young men who had been called for military training.³⁶ Another was written to Justice Davis, thanking him for allowing the delegates to discuss their concerns with the authorities. Then he added:

But pard[on] me to express my sore feeling that the willingness of many of the Mennonite churches for the great work for the wounded and sick soldiers, even on the battlefield, even in the army – an unheard of thing in North-American Mennonite history – could not get any more recognition of the authorities then [sic] some other entirely different work. We must feel it a setback at home, because there it was agreed that way to present the boys to the Government in groups. ...I am not able. Besides that the public hearings of the courts will disturb the public sentiment, because in Alberta for example there have been burned two Mennonite Churches in the same night. It is a serious situation.

As the offered service for the boys I am handing to the Government is a question of life and death. I beg your pardon for being free both in thanking you and praying for a little more consideration in the procedure in accepting them by lists.³⁷

Davis responded on 4 December, characterizing Janz's proposal as requesting permission to submit lists of young men who would then be eligible to "render civilian service." Davis stated unequivocally that this was impossible because that "would be to delegate the power of government to a self-constituted body."³⁸

Janz could not refrain from correcting Davis in his letter of 16 December. "May I point out," he stated, "that the proposal I made to the Government on Nov. 19th is going farther, then [sic] to offer only civilian service under civilian authority." He then explained in detail what he was willing to concede. "Our duty," he stated, "is to preserve life, not to destroy life nor to participate in any work for destruction of life. From the viewpoint of the Government it might be considered as part of the military machine and service."³⁹ Once again he attached the proposals of 19 November.

Two days later Janz wrote in much the same vein to Hon. James G. Gardiner. He wrote: "While it is true that with one exception the delegation pleaded for civil service under civil authority, I was the

only one to emphasize the great work of mercy to the wounded and sick soldiers, not objecting to military circumstances” Again he pleaded to have the young men accepted by lists. His people had been greatly disappointed by the authorities for not recognizing “their progressive attitude in an endeavor to be of the greatest possible service, while at the same time maintaining their convictions regarding war. This attitude, of course, is an unheard thing in Mennonite history on the North American continent.”⁴⁰

On 24 December the government finally declared its position by an Order-in Council, amending the National War Services Act. It outlined three basic types of service:⁴¹ 1) postponement of military training and non-combatant service; 2) training as stretcher bearers, hospital attendants, ambulance operators; 3) civilian public service. These alternatives were not easily implemented for a variety of reasons. But an alternative service program was finally announced in May 1941. In practice the application of the rules of the program varied drastically from region to region and changed over time. One phase of negotiations with the government was completed, but Janz’s troubles were not over.

In June 1941 the issue boiled to a new crisis point again when serious issues with implementation of policies emerged in Alberta. On 13 June 1940 Janz wrote to Gardener, thanking him that the government was respecting the conscience of young men by assigning them to park work, but he reminded Gardiner about the previous year’s negotiations and pleaded again that the young men be allowed to do ambulance work, even if it would be connected with the army. Two weeks later he wrote to the Minister of National War Services, J. W. Thorson, stating that “I am very sorry now that the situation turned to the worst and I find no other way but place it before you with anxiety and grave concern.” Conscientious objectors were being drafted into the army for non-combatant roles, but were required to undergo military training and to carry rifles. “Many a young man,” he stated, “will rather go to jail then [sic] march with a rifle in the preliminary military training.” Janz had offered ambulance service, which had been rejected. “Here I am, I can’t change it, so help me God.” The churches had trusted him in his efforts to negotiate a reasonable policy; now he was personally in a most difficult and embarrassing position and the people no longer trusted him or the government.

On 3 July he followed with another detailed letter, reviewing the history of negotiations. Noncombatant service, he stated, was war and war work and was not acceptable. The people of Alberta had been deceived, and they were being punished for their love and care for the wounded. If they had been quiet, they would have received work without connection to war like those of the other provinces. Now he

would be satisfied if the young men would be assigned to park work, since ambulance service was apparently not needed.

The most poignant letter, however, was written to LaFleche on 15 July 1942. After reviewing earlier negotiations, he charged:

Now after the hearing of the boys in June we are witnessing the collapse of the whole situation for our C.O.s [conscientious objectors]: No ambulance work at all, but a very strong pressure to work in the army for destruction as noncombatants, including 2 months full military training with arms.

The hearings, he argued, were not a religious test but were simply a test to determine if the applicant “was a descendant of the old stock people of the 1873 Order in Council.” “Our people are shocked,” he stated. “Why is our government not keeping its word?” He continued:

So naturally our people consider, that Janz has misled his people and the Government is treating bad these people who right from the start were willing to do their utmost, while others refused to do anything. And they say, it was wrong to step aside from the declaration of the seven delegates and express willingness for a special important service. The confidence of the people is nearly gone for the government as well as for Janz.

It is in Alberta, where our people were trusting the Government more than anybody else, now these people feel to be fooled more than any other province. That is not fair. The other provinces are far better off.

Finally, Janz submitted, there were only two options: “1) to push it through like the dictators overseas, to treat the boys and their leaders rough, to put them in jail or to shoot them, etc....; 2) on the other hand to adjust it quietly.” He signed the letter, “Yours with deep sorrows.”

The following years revealed that much work still needed to be done. Janz continued to be unhappy about the lack of provision for a *Sanitätsdienst* and had to deal with the many difficulties encountered by individual young men. In September 1943 an Order-in-Council opened up the possibility of a restricted Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps or Dental Corps without the requirement to bear arms. But for various reasons that too failed as a practical alternative and only 227 men in total enlisted.⁴² Essentially, therefore, Janz failed in his valiant efforts to secure a viable alternative.

Excursus

On 13 August 1943 John Ewert, a radar instructor for the Royal Canadian Air Force, died in the crash of a training flight in Quebec. Ewert, the brother of David Ewert, had grown up in the Coaldale, Alberta community and had attended the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church where B. B. Janz was the leader for many years. The funeral was held in the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church, and a large contingent of air force personnel were part of the funeral procession and gave full honor to the departed comrade. It was an impressive sight the memory of which was indelibly imprinted in the minds of many young lads, including the author. According to John's brother David, the father consulted with B. B. Janz concerning whether to give permission to the Air Force to participate in such a fashion. Janz did not object but was fully supportive. Guns, however, were not allowed to be carried by any of the personnel and the Air Force was not otherwise involved in the funeral.⁴³

This incident has sometimes been seen as compromising the nonresistant position which Janz espoused. However, Janz apparently did not see it as presenting any difficulty and he was fully supportive of the decision made by the Ewert family. There is no record of any discussion of the issue by the church or by church leaders.

Conclusions

There are a number of questions that arise about the circumstances, issues, and personalities that came into play during this critical period of negotiations with the government.

First, there were two principal issues at stake. The most obvious one was the question of whether Mennonites ought to be willing to participate in a kind of *Sanitätsdienst*, or medical corps, either under civilian or military supervision. Janz consistently favored such a policy for two main reasons: 1) because it was directed to the saving of lives without regard to personal safety, and 2) because it would appease those at home who thought the Mennonites were not loyal citizens and were simply shirkers who benefitted from the sacrifice of others. The latter might be seen as based on expediency and trying to buy the goodwill of fellow citizens, but the potential cost was great in terms of lives lost. There seems to be no good reason to question Janz's motives.

On the other hand, the eastern Mennonites were equally convinced that they needed to distance themselves from the war effort and that any activity at the front, even if it were the saving of soldier's

lives, would implicate them. They were even opposed to anything which might symbolically suggest a support of the war (e.g. badges, uniforms). Janz, for his part, was willing to let the government and the citizenry interpret the medical corps as support for the war if they wished – the important thing was that the Mennonites themselves must be clear about how they viewed their work and clearly state their own position so that it could not be misinterpreted. The easterners, for their part, did not face the same threats of harassment and persecution at home and seemed to have little to lose by their more “radical” pacifism. Still, there is little reason to question the sincerity of their motives.

The other issue that concerned Janz perhaps just as much was the question of the submission of lists which would serve as a basis for exemption from military service. There is perhaps some irony or at least the appearance of contradiction in Janz’s position on this issue. He was a member of a group, the Mennonite Brethren, that had a strong emphasis on individual accountability and personal confession of faith. Why then not allow that principle to prevail on this issue and expect the young men to answer personally regarding their nonresistant position to the authorities? Janz was certainly not happy with the way his fellow western conservative Mennonites had functioned in the past and with the policies which allowed all young men who identified themselves as Mennonites by virtue of descent to be exempt. He had been very critical of the fact that in World War I many young men had not behaved in keeping with their alleged faith and had brought shame and disrepute on Mennonites as a whole.

Janz was clearly worried about three things: 1) that the young men, even if they held their conviction with integrity, would not be able to respond satisfactorily to the questions they might be asked; 2) he realized that the hearings would not likely be impartial and because they were public, the pressure on the board would result in discrimination against them. Accountability should be to the church which was in a much better position to assess the candidate’s integrity; and 3) the alternatives could be much worse.

The eastern delegates, of course, were not as fearful about the practical outcome and were virtually assured that all of their young men who claimed exemption would be successful without a difficult process of interrogation. Not nearly as much was at stake for them.

Another factor that is interesting to examine is the role of different personalities, their backgrounds and the constituencies they represented. Janz, in addition to being a westerner, was also an experienced negotiator with government and someone who clearly represented the *Russländer* and their experience with the *Sanitätsdienst*. There were only two other *Russländer* on the delegation of eight in early November – C. F. Klassen, also from the west, and J. H. Janzen from

Waterloo/Kitchener. Janz stood virtually alone as an advocate of the medical corps. Klassen seems not to have taken a strong position either way, whereas Jansen, although somewhat open to Janz's position, put loyalty to his fellow easterners ahead of other considerations. Janz still wore another hat, however, and that was as a representative of the Mennonite Brethren, most of whom were Russländer. David Toews, not a Russländer himself, nevertheless represented a more mixed constituency of Russländer and Kanadier and again was more open to both alternatives but felt that a united stand with the east was imperative. Given the nature of the delegation, it would have been easy to identify Janz as essentially an advocate for the Mennonite Brethren. However, the correspondence does not suggest that the lines were drawn denominationally, although the public may have perceived it as such to some degree.

One of the interesting things about these negotiations and the strong and divergent opinions of the personalities involved is that there is little if any evidence of recrimination and harsh conflict between the individuals involved. Personal attacks were essentially absent. Certainly Janz was blamed for breaking rank, and at times there was suspicion that he was acting contrary to their consensus behind their backs. But essentially Janz was always open about his activity and indicated to them when he could no longer act in keeping with the majority. Mutual respect seemed to prevail. No doubt the other representatives also knew that Janz was honestly representing his constituency which would stand behind him. Janz, on the other hand, at times showed his frustration, as when he, somewhat condescendingly, characterized his own position as one which was unheard of by North American Mennonites. They simply were not with it.

During the final years of the war, Janz's ministry was essentially a pastoral one.⁴⁴ He counseled young men who found themselves drafted into the military despite their attempts to register as COs; he sternly rebuked those who failed to do their duty and also those whose behavior was not in keeping with their professed faith; and he consoled parents of young men who found themselves in various difficult circumstances. The embarrassment that Janz had experienced because of his failure to convince either the government or his fellow Mennonite leaders to accept his point of view did not isolate him or result in his withdrawal from active participation in dealing with the realities that the war brought upon his people.

Notes

- ¹ T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
- ² See, for example William Janzen, *The Limits of Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); David Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection in World War II" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, 1977; J. A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada during World War II* (Winnipeg: Publication Committee of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1959).
- ³ The B.B. Janz collection which is housed at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg (CMBS) contains very extensive files pertaining to the negotiations.
- ⁴ See, e.g., John B. Toews, *With Courage to Spare: The Life of B.B. Janz (1877-1964)*. (Winnipeg: Board of Christian Literature, 1978); Helmut Harder, *David Toews Was Here, 1870-1947*. 2nd. ed. (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2006); Herbert and Maureen Klassen, *Ambassador to his People: C. F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990).
- ⁵ *Ibid.* Harder does not deal with the November 1940, negotiations at all whereas Klassen refers to them only briefly.
- ⁶ Toews, *With Courage to Spare*, 110 ff.
- ⁷ Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 39.
- ⁸ See important documents in David P. Reimer, ed., *Experiences of the Mennonites of Canada during the Second World War, 1939-1945* (Altona, MB, np., nd).
- ⁹ Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 44.
- ¹⁰ Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 91-93.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.
- ¹² B.B. Janz papers, File #66, CMBS.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 95.
- ¹⁵ Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 47.
- ¹⁶ Janz, File # 65, CMBS.
- ¹⁷ Janz, File # 65b, CMBS.
- ¹⁸ Janz, File # 45, 46, CMBS.
- ¹⁹ Obituary, *Der Bote*, 6 Aug., 1980, 7.
- ²⁰ Janz, Files # 65, 65a, CMBS.
- ²¹ Letter to western leaders, Nov. 15, 1940. Janz, File #65b, CMBS.
- ²² Fransen, 99-100.
- ²³ Janz, File # 67, CMBS.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Janz, File # 65b, CMBS.
- ²⁶ Janz, File # 46, CMBS.
- ²⁷ Janz, File # 65b, CMBS.
- ²⁸ Janz, File # 65, 65a, CMBS.
- ²⁹ Janz, File # 65a, CMBS.
- ³⁰ Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 101.
- ³¹ Janz, File # 67, CMBS.
- ³² Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 102.
- ³³ Janz, File #67, CMBS.
- ³⁴ Janz, File #65a, CMBS.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Janz, File #66, CMBS.
- ³⁷ Janz, File # 65, CMBS.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For details, see Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 108ff. A German translation of the document is in Janz, File #67, CMBS.

⁴² For a detailed review of the various estimates of the number of Mennonites who served in the armed forces, in the medical or dental corps, and the number of conscientious objectors, see Ted Regehr, "Lost Sons: The Canadian Mennonite Soldiers of World War II." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66: 4 (1992): 462ff.

⁴³ The information was provided in an interview with David Ewert, December, 2006.

⁴⁴ See Toews, *With Courage to Spare*, 115ff.