

Judge Adamson Versus the Mennonites of Manitoba During World War II

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During World War II Manitoba Mennonites fought two major battles. The first was among themselves as the two immigrant groups from Russia, the *Kanadier* (those who immigrated in the 1870s) and the *Russlaender* (those who immigrated in the 1920s), contended with each other in an attempt to develop a united response to the Canadian Government's initiative to establish an alternative service program. The second battle was with the chairman of the local Mobilization Board, Judge John E. Adamson, who was more concerned with securing men for the Canadian armed forces than with providing fair judgments on the eligibility of Mennonite young men for conscientious objector (CO) status. There is no doubt that the Mennonites of Manitoba emerged from these battles badly divided and bruised.

The differences between the two immigrant groups can be traced back to their common experience in tsarist Russia. Immigrating to the Ukraine in 1789, at the invitation from Catherine the Great who guaranteed them complete exemption from conscription and military service, the Mennonites enjoyed almost a century of secure and prosperous life in the Ukraine. But the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War (1853-1856) prompted a major reform of the military system.¹ Throughout the 1860s changes were initiated at all levels in Russia's armed forces; the Ministry of War was reorganized, the military districts were rearranged and various revisions were made in the education and training of recruits. The final change which completed the great reforms and altered Russian society at this time, was the introduction of compulsory universal conscription.²

Herein lies the division that came to hinder relationships between the two immigrant groups in Manitoba during World War II. While the *Kanadier* in Canada were able to maintain their theologically-based stance of nonresistance without challenge until World War II, the *Russlaender* Mennonites who

stayed in Russia until the 1920s could not; they had no choice but to become involved in that country's alternative service programs. This included forestry service and eventually participation in non-combatant service units in the medical corps of the Russian military.³ When the two groups were challenged to some form of alternative service in lieu of Canadian military service during the war, the *Russlaender* were quick to adapt, as they had in Russia, while the *Kanadier* sought at all costs to retain their status of complete exemption as provided by the Canadian government in the 1873 Privilegium.⁴ It was only after the *Kanadier* realized that they no longer had any other options available to them that they (i.e. a committee of some of their leading ministers, hereafter referred to as the *Aeltestenkomitee*) reluctantly consented to an alternative service program.⁵ But by this time the suspicion and resentment was so strong between the two groups that a united response to the federal government became impossible.

This inability of Manitoba Mennonites to join forces on this important issue was compounded by the zealous efforts of the chairman of the local Mobilization Board, Judge John E. Adamson, to draft as many Mennonites into active military service as possible. Born of an Irish immigrant family in 1884, he grew up on the family homestead near Nelson, Manitoba. This small community was near the present-day Morden, Manitoba, and also close to the largest Mennonite settlement, the West Reserve. Following graduation from Nelson High School, he studied at St. John's College and the University of Manitoba, where he received his Master of Arts degree.⁶

Adamson articulated with several law firms and was called to the bar in Manitoba in 1910. On May 1, 1922, he became the first Manitoba-born lawyer to be elevated to the Court of King's Bench. He filled this post for nearly 26 years. From 1940 to 1947 he served as chairman of the Mobilization Board for Manitoba. On January 31, 1948, he was appointed a justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal. Some years later, on January 13, 1955, he was appointed Chief Justice of Manitoba and of the Appeal Court—again the first native-born Manitoban to fill that post.⁷

Adamson came into conflict with conscientious objectors in Manitoba and the Mennonite community partly because he took his mandate and his powerful position on the War Services Board most seriously. His strong sense of justice and his pro-British predisposition endeared him to the hearts of Manitobans generally. He nevertheless found himself caught between honouring the theological values of a minority community, and pacifying the intense anti-German prejudices of the Anglo-Canadian majority.

Tensions reached crisis proportions in late summer and early fall of 1940. There were a number of reasons for agitation within the Mennonite community. One was the fact that Mennonite young men were being called in for medical examinations. While such checkups did not mean that they would necessarily be called upon to serve, it was clear that soon these young men would be forced to deal more personally with the question of military service. Particularly disturbing was the fact that many young Mennonite men

were actually volunteering to join the military. Recent studies have put the figure of all Mennonite volunteers in Canada at 4,508, with the highest number, 1,132, from the province of Manitoba.⁸ Such bold defiance of the traditional Mennonite position on non-resistance from within the Mennonite community had never happened before.

These rapid developments in the summer of 1940 were of great concern to the Mennonite community. Steps were immediately taken to tighten the peace forces against the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) passed on June 21, 1940. Mennonite groups sent statements to Ottawa outlining the traditional Mennonite stance on war. This, however, did not alleviate everyone's anxiety. Some believed that if the government had guaranteed Mennonite rights in the law, then it could be trusted to honour those rights. Others felt that there should be greater conformity as well as preparation to coordinate efforts of the various churches and represent them before the government officials.⁹ There were misgivings about what form of service that might be expected. The *Kanadier* were opposed to all forms of service while the *Russlaender* debated among themselves about performing either a civilian form of service under civilian supervision, or a non-combatant service.

In Manitoba the Mennonites and the federal government had clashed long before conscription was announced. The problem was that Judge Adamson did not seem to consider the conscientious objector position as legitimate, and defined as narrowly as possible the regulations for granting postponements. He also appeared to take it as his personal mission to obtain as many recruits for the military as possible, and therefore saw the Mennonites with their pacifist position as a major obstacle to reaching this goal.

The first hearings of the Manitoba Mobilization Board began in December of 1940. The Board began hearing the applications of nearly 1,000 men for postponement of their 30-day period of training. In order to expedite matters, Judge Adamson divided the applicants into two groups which he and Judge J.L. Bowman, a Mobilization Board member, examined simultaneously.¹⁰

It soon became apparent to the young men appearing before the judges Adamson and Bowman that both were taking a clear stance against conscientious objectors. It was the beginning of what was to become a five-year-long struggle between the Manitoba judges on the one side and the Mennonites and other conscientious objectors on the other. Throughout the war, and even thereafter, Adamson expended much energy collecting as many arguments as possible against the conscientious objector position. He articulated his views in a paper he wrote on conscientious objectors sometime in 1941.¹¹ His and other arguments against the CO status culminated in the publication of a book in 1946, written by his good friend Dr. Herbert W. Wadge, entitled: *Should a Christian Fight? The Position of Conscientious Objectors*.¹²

As stipulated in the regulations of the NRMA Act, a Mobilization Board was responsible for determining a man's eligibility for conscientious objector status. Given this mandate, it was not difficult for an individual such as

Adamson, who was predisposed to encouraging as many men as possible to join the armed forces, to exert considerable pressure upon the young applicants. Nevertheless, the task of rendering judgement upon a man's conscience was in itself hazardous. It was inevitable that certain genuine conscientious objectors would not receive postponement, just as it was inevitable that others, who were not genuine, would succeed in convincing the boards that they were.

Not only was this a problem for the Mobilization Boards but for the Mennonite churches as well. Though born into a Mennonite family, a young person only became a member of a Mennonite church upon confession of faith and baptism. One did not become a Mennonite by virtue of biological birth.¹³ Therefore, Mennonite young men were coming before the boards as conscientious objectors who had not yet been baptized and formally accepted into membership.

For Judge Adamson, this ambiguity provided a crack in the door which he attempted to widen considerably. In a speech delivered to bishops, preachers, fathers and sons before hearing applications for postponements as conscientious objectors on May 7, 1941 in Steinbach, Manitoba, Adamson appealed to the Mennonites' sense of obligation to their country. He stated emphatically that without some visible support for Canada, they were revealing themselves as siding with the enemy.

The question today is, "Are Mennonites going to help, or are you going to fail your country in her hour of trial and need?" Every man and every woman in this country is either for Canada or for Hitler. Every man and woman, whether he or she intends it or not, is either helping Canada or helping Hitler. If there is something which you can do to help Canada that you do not do, you are helping Hitler.¹⁴

Adamson went on to address the question of conscience directly. He provided his own interpretation regarding the limits of conscience, particularly when the future of a nation was at stake. For him the national cause was on a higher plain than that of personal conscience and religious scruples.

Some of you will say, "My conscience will not allow me to take life." I do not blame you for holding human life sacred and not wanting to kill. No good man wants to take the life of his fellowman. Let me tell you that Canada's part in this war is to save lives, to save the lives of women and children, and to save the life of nations from the brutality of the international gangsters and robbers. A perfect Christian might say he would rather lose his own life than take the life of his would-be murderer, but no true Christian can say he would stand by and see a murderer take the life of a child rather than take a murderer's life. Your country calls you to join in this crusade to save lives.¹⁵

Though actively involved in the Anglican Church of Canada, Adamson seems to have had very little tolerance for theological positions which differed from his own. His letters or writings on conscientious objection and Mennonites do not indicate that he ever attempted to understand the Mennonites and their theological position on war. Instead he used all kinds of

devices, including arguments for non-combatant service, scare tactics and even fanning the fires of prejudice to contradict the Mennonite position on non-resistance. Clearly Adamson saw his role and task to be that of dissuading as many Mennonites as possible from claiming conscientious objector status.

From time to time Adamson changed his demeanor and appeared warm and friendly to the young Mennonite men whom he considered, for the most part as innocent and impressionable. As is evident further on in his speech, he appealed to their sense of adventure. He tried to paint for them a picture of military life which was grand and florid. He seemed to blame conscientious objection mostly upon the leadership within the Mennonite churches. He always reserved his heaviest ammunition for the Mennonite leadership whom he considered to be the main culprits. Adamson thought—and this is supported in some of his other letters and documents—that were it not for the interference of Mennonite leaders the young men could be easily convinced to join the military. He continually pointed out to the Mennonite leaders that if they really believed in freedom of conscience, they should not try to persuade their young men to be conscientious objectors. Rather, they should let him and the other judges and members of the various mobilization boards across Canada convince all young men of the correctness of joining Canada in the fight taking place overseas. For Adamson, somehow, that did not constitute interference with a person's conscience. In his Steinbach speech Adamson attacked the Mennonite leaders directly on this point.

To you bishops, preachers, elders and fathers, I say, do not attempt to influence these young men. Leave them free. Remember it is their conscience, and not yours. If you do influence them, you will do them a great injury and will put a black mark upon your own church. And to you young men, I say you need not be nervous here today. Only speak the truth. Do not say anything that you do not really, sincerely believe. Remember it is your conscience. Remember too that it is your country.¹⁶

What influence Adamson actually exercised upon these young men is difficult to measure. As has already been indicated, some 4,508 Mennonite men enlisted in the armed forces during the Second World War. At the same time the best available figures indicate that some 7,500 Mennonites were ultimately classified as conscientious objectors.¹⁷ No figure is available as to how many Mennonite men who were conscientious objectors were granted other postponements, e.g. for agriculture.

If one combines the total number of Mennonites who were granted CO service postponement and the total number enlisted in the armed forces, one finds that about 38% of Mennonite men in Canada enlisted in the military. Do these figures in any way reflect the success of a staunch military supporter/recruiter such as Adamson, or do they reflect a general erosion of the Mennonite position on non-resistance? While considerably more study would have to be done to ascertain why many young Mennonite men from Manitoba actually joined the armed forces, there can be little doubt that the aggressive

manner in which Adamson approached this issue did have an impact upon some of the young Mennonites.

As of the early summer of 1941 Adamson exerted more pressure upon the Mennonites, particularly the young men whom he called before him and harshly questioned them with regard to their religious convictions. By July he had so upset the members of the *Aeltestenkomitee* that they wrote a letter of concern to the new Minister of National War Services, the Honourable J.T. Thorson. Very carefully they made their point in such a way so as not to further antagonize the Mobilization Board, while expressing their concern over the way the Board was treating their young men. In particular they pointed out that the total exemption granted Mennonites in the 1873 Order in Council was no longer being honoured.

We do not speak about boys who have been untrue to the Mennonite faith but about those who could not clearly enough express their conscientious objections to the judges. We do not in any way blame the Board of National War Services at Winnipeg, nor the judges. They did their duty as they saw it, and have shown us, as Mennonites, every consideration. But, as we understand the Order-in-Council of August 13, 1873, these boys are the descendants of the Mennonites who came to Canada under this Order-in-Council and have been true to the Mennonite faith, and are, therefore, exempt from military service or military training. All these boys are willing to do constructive work for the Government, as in parks, on roads, etc., under civil authorities.¹⁸

Shortly thereafter Adamson reported to Thorson that he had rejected the claims of some 200 conscientious objectors. The grounds for these rejections were twofold. In the first group there were those young men who could not convince the Board that they were genuine conscientious objectors. The second group included those individuals who had not made their claim for conscientious objector status within the prescribed eight days after receiving their letter to report for a medical examination.¹⁹

Adamson acknowledged that the Board was certainly susceptible to making mistakes in judgement on individuals. However, he noted that the only way to avoid making such mistakes at all would be to accept every application for conscientious objection. But, he argued, the Board might then err in granting conscientious objector status to "many who are not sincere," and they then "would avoid the service."²⁰ It appears that Adamson decided that he would assume the role of an arbiter of a man's conscience and be willing to take the blame for whatever mistakes occurred.

But what seems to have bothered Adamson most was the fact that a good number of Mennonites were choosing to join the military and still claiming to be members of Mennonite churches. In his letter Adamson cited numerous examples of such inconsistency. Two such examples are reflected below.

Last month at Brandon the Board had before it a recruit asking for harvest leave. He had been before the Board in spring as a C.O. and pressed his claim quite vehemently. It was indeed illuminating to read the evidence he then gave and to see this contented man in a uniform.

There has been the case, too, of a man applying as a C.O., press his claim before the Board, and after such claim being allowed such man enlisting within a week.²¹

Nonetheless Deputy Minister L.R. LaFleche responded to Adamson and reminded him subtly of what his duties were as a member of the Mobilization Board in Manitoba. He stated that in view of the fact that provision had been made in the regulations for alternative service young men should be granted this postponement as long as they were sincere conscientious objectors.²² He reflected upon a recent visit of several leading Mennonites who had brought forward several complaints concerning mobilization boards. Undoubtedly the Winnipeg Board was one which they had in mind.

I had a visit from Bishop David Toews, Rosthern, Saskatchewan, the Rev. J.H. Enns, 55 Keats St., Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Mr. C.S.[F.] Klassen, 165 Cathedral Ave., Winnipeg—all Mennonites. They seemed very grateful for the consideration that has been tendered their young co-religionists by the Department, but it did come out that they were somewhat hurt at the thought that some of our Boards do not grant postponement orders to some of their young men. They, of course, believe that such young men are good and sincere when they put in their applications for postponement. It is very hard not to take such a fine man as Bishop Toews at par.²³

The issue addressed here became very acute in the fall of 1941.

The specific point in question was the procedure for determining who was a legitimate conscientious objector. For the sake of comparison it is worth looking at the differences between the Ontario and Manitoba Mobilization Board procedures. In Ontario the Mennonites were called upon to judge CO claimants themselves. If they declared a certain individual to be a Mennonite church member in good standing, he automatically received his postponement. Several variables influencing this process were the relationship of the youth to his minister, the integrity of the minister, and the integrity of the designated Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC) official who countersigned the required certificates. There were, obviously, no guarantees that only genuine conscientious objectors would receive postponement, and many individuals found themselves in alternative service work camps who would not have been there had it not been for the intercession of their church leaders.²⁴

The Manitoba method exhibited a close affinity to the adversarial system of normal judicial procedures. Unless the individual was able to satisfy the board that he genuinely objected to his participation in war for religious reasons, he was ordered to report for military service.²⁵ Upon receiving these orders, some Mennonite men refused to acknowledge them, and were therefore sentenced to jail.

In October of 1941 the situation became very critical when a number of young men were sentenced and escorted to jail. What happened was that a group of five young men went before Judge Adamson in late summer and were refused their conscientious objector status. In due course they were

asked to report for military training, which they refused. On September 27, 1941, the five were served a summons which was returnable at Provincial Police Court in Gretna, Manitoba, on October 3. Four of the five responded to the summons and came to the police court and gave statements to the officer in charge, namely D.A. Batchelor. It is illustrative to look at these statements. One of the accused, Jacob Klippenstein, noted as follows:

It was soon after I received the letter to report for Military Service that I went down to see Bishop TOEWS at Altona. The reason I went to see Bishop TOEWS was because he was a member of the board that went to Ottawa. I asked Bishop TOEWS what he thought was the best way to do. Bishop TOEWS thought the best way to do was to send the notice back and give the reason why I did not wish to report. I sent my notice back and it was later returned by the Military authorities.²⁶

Perhaps the most revealing statement was provided by Peter Derksen. The tone, the advice from the Bishop, and the timing of events are not above suspicion. Upon reading the statement one can easily understand how someone like Adamson might tend to view most conscientious objectors with suspicion.

About two Sundays before I received my notice to report for Military training I was at church at Plum Coulee. Bishop SCHOLZ [sic.] who lives at Altona was the preacher that Sunday. At the end of the sermon Bishop SCHOLZ [sic.] told the congregation that any member of his church who received cards or a notice to report for military service, that they could send the notice back to where it came from if their conscience told them they should, and they could keep the cards and report for Military service if their conscience said so. After I sent my notice back I went to see Bishop SCHOLZ [sic.] again and asked him what he thought. He said if I wrote and told them what my conscience thought it was O.K. He said sending the notices back was right as he would rather see that we did send them back than not. I was in the beer parlour at both Altona and Plum Coulee last fall when I was 20 years old. I drank a few beers each time but never got drunk. I did not get religious until I became 21 years of age and joined the church just a short time before I went to Winnipeg to claim exemption. I was baptized two days after I came back from Winnipeg. I did not join the church to get out of Military service but I do not want to bear arms.²⁷

In the Memorandum LaFleche quotes from the police report of officer Batchelor who provided his own impressions of what had happened. He noted that a trial was held for the defaulters on October 3, 1941, in Gretna, Manitoba. The Police Magistrate of Gretna, a Mr. Greer, uniformly dealt out the severe sentence of 12 months hard labour, a \$200 fine or 3 months in default. Batchelor concludes from reliable reports that it appeared that the magistrate was somewhat prejudiced against the Mennonite community.

But Adamson still blamed the entire situation in Manitoba upon the Mennonite leadership. In a letter to Thorson he noted:

It is one thing for the Bishops and Preachers to prepare these young men to come before the Board and to assist them... when the question of their conscientious

objection is being considered; it is quite another thing to advise these young men to disregard the orders calling them up after the Board has made its decision. It would seem to me that in the latter case it is, at the least, a technical violation of Section 35(a) of the National War Services Regulations, 1940 (Recruits). The Police in this province are now asking for instructions as to whether or not some of these Bishops and Preachers should not be prosecuted for counseling and advising under Section 35(a).²⁸

Nowhere was there more concern over the events of October than in the *Kanadier* congregations. In particular the *Aeltestenkomitee* was very concerned about how to respond to these events. By the end of October a total of some eleven young men had been sentenced, nine of whom were *Kanadier*. In a meeting of all the ministers, the *Aeltestenkomitee* reported on the events as they had transpired. They were convinced that all convicted men were genuine conscientious objectors who had met all the legal demands at the time they were asked to report for their medical examination. But they admitted that the young men had not done as they were supposed to, when they had refused to report for military training following their failure to obtain conscientious objector status. When they failed to report at the Portage barracks, they were summoned to stand trial before Judge Greer, who they felt did not consider their religious convictions at all.

Following the sentencing of these eleven, the *Aeltestenkomitee* conferred with Judge Adamson over the matter. Adamson claimed no jurisdiction over the young men at this stage. He was, of course, right. However, not having legal jurisdiction over a matter had not stopped him in the past. But his advice to the *Aeltestenkomitee* was simply to refer them to the provincial attorney-general. The attorney-general, in turn, advised them to appeal to Ottawa. At first they refused to do this since they felt an appeal could only be successful if made by a lawyer, and the use of the courts was strictly against their religious convictions.²⁹ But when the committee consulted members of the Manitoba Legislature it was advised to make a direct appeal to the War Department in Ottawa. The committee finally did so on its own. But Ottawa informed them that only by a change in the Order in Council could the young men obtain a new hearing. "At the present the rulings of the provincial War Service Board are decisive and final."³⁰

But the crisis of having young conscientious objectors in jail had a somewhat unifying effect upon Manitoba Mennonites, as well as Mennonites in other provinces.³¹ As one of the ministers remarked, "These boys, suffering in prison, are not only bearing testimony of their own faith, but are symbolizing the faith and convictions of our Mennonite people."³² The matter was of such concern that soon Mennonites across Canada became aware of what had happened in Manitoba.

Not only among the Mennonites but also in government circles the issue became of some concern. The Minister of Justice Louis St-Laurent was informed and one of his officials, Mr. R.G. Warnock, investigated the matter. His memorandum on the subject, dated January 21, 1942, revealed that the

pressure being put upon Adamson from Ottawa seemed to have had only slight effect.³³ While the young men in jail would remain there, Adamson, it seems, did agree to be more open to accepting Mennonite young men's claims for conscientious objector status.

But in reality matters were at an impasse, hence in September the situation heated up once again. This time eight more Mennonite young men were sentenced to a jail term with hard labour at Headingley and two to a jail term and fines at Dauphin. David Toews and C.F. Klassen protested vehemently to J.T. Thorson by letter. In the letter they described what happened.

Our young men were called before the Board. We will not mention anything about the way they were questioned. We will leave that to history. The young men knew nothing of the verdict of the Board for a long time after the hearing. Some then were called to alternative service in labour camps and some responded to these calls. Others received a call for military training. Some followed the call, but most of them did not because they knew their scruples re military training better than any other person. They wrote to the Board that they, owing to conscientious scruples, could not do military training, and expressed their willingness to do labour in camps for C.O.'s.

After some time one after another of these men was called before a Police Magistrate and sentenced to very severe penalties.³⁴

Klassen and Toews went on to describe the situation as they saw it in Manitoba. They also indicated that a somewhat similar situation existed in Saskatchewan. For the Mennonite community the situation was becoming unbearable. What they found difficult to comprehend was that, although the regulations prescribed work of national importance for conscientious objectors, the government was instead putting men in jail who were ready and willing to do the prescribed work. They also found it difficult to understand why the testimony of a young man's minister was given no consideration. Especially difficult was the process their young men were put through. That process as they described it was:

Mennonites examined and cross-examined by lawyers as though there is an attempt to hide the truth. Have we not established a reputation for honesty and truthfulness? We humbly submit, that justice demands that the situation be changed so that there is a possibility of an appeal for those who are refused recognition as Mennonites or conscientious objectors.³⁵

But in a letter of October 24, 1942, it became apparent what was at issue for Judge Adamson and why he had become so disgusted with the entire situation. His problem, besides not believing that a Christian conscientious objector position was credible, was that hundreds of conscientious objectors came before him and he had no place to send them. True, there were some alternative service camps already established. But in actual fact they accommodated very few of the thousands of conscientious objectors. Thus, at the very moment when the Canadian manpower situation for the military was critical, conscientious objectors, ready and willing to work, had no place to go. The Department was simply not prepared for all the conscientious objec-

tors and did not have enough alternative service positions available. Adamson made this abundantly clear in a letter to L.R. LaFleche, noting that he had some 800 men waiting for positions.³⁶

Adamson was caught in a complicated dilemma. He was to provide postponements to the conscientious objectors and at the same time had no place for them to be assigned. He was increasingly frustrated because the list of conscientious objectors was constantly growing. If he did not postpone the conscientious objectors continually, he then had to overrule their conscientious objector status and send them into military camps. If they refused to go, they would be sentenced and sent to jail.

The critical situation in Manitoba, and to some extent in Saskatchewan, finally reached the office of the Prime Minister. Mackenzie King sent a communique to LaFleche on October 29, 1942, together with a letter of complaint which he had received from David Toews. The Prime Minister expressed concern over the discrepancy between the interpretation of the National War Services regulations in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia on the one hand and in Manitoba and Saskatchewan on the other.³⁷

In the meantime Arthur MacNamara, Deputy Minister of Labour in charge of Selective Service, received another letter of complaint from C.F. Klassen in Winnipeg, noting that an additional eight Mennonite men had been sent to jail. Klassen pointed out the futility of the policy of sending men to jail, where they would be unproductive, when some of them were needed badly at home on the farm and others could be utilized by the Selective Service for various jobs in Canada.³⁸

MacNamara was disturbed by the letter. After investigating the situation he wrote a letter to Adamson concluding his letter with an appeal to the Manitoba Board to re-consider the decision made in the cases of these young men.

I appreciate the difficulties which are involved in connection with these cases. The Board must assume the responsibility for the decision and yet the decision, in most cases, is a difficult one to arrive at since it is based on an enquiry into the man's mind and beliefs. The men who are refused postponement and still adhere to their refusal to report for military service must be prepared to accept the consequences. However, in some of these cases where the subsequent actions of the men, in the course of their imprisonment, offer reasonable evidence of continued adherence to apparently sincere religious convictions, I suggest that the Mobilization Board should be prepared to consider a request for re-consideration.³⁹

Finally Adamson seemed to be getting the message that Selective Service in Ottawa was concerned about his actions. He consented to reopen the cases of the young men in question. At the same time other groups in Manitoba were complaining to MacNamara about the tactics Adamson was using. An example was given by B.E. Lewis, Secretary of the Manitoba Federation of Agriculture, in a letter to MacNamara of September 1, 1943. He described the situation of a hearing of a young man requesting postponement for essential services in agriculture as follows:

I wish to submit for your most serious consideration the effect of the semi-court atmosphere upon many who are called to appear. I have witnessed such a condition of nervousness which rendered the young farmer almost speechless and definitely unable to properly state his case.⁴⁰

Among religious groups the Mennonites were not the only ones who felt that their conscientious objectors were being treated unfairly. One of the best descriptions of how Adamson conducted a hearing is provided by a lawyer, L.D. Morosnick, who sent MacNamara a copy of his description of what had happened to two Jehovah's Witnesses he was defending.

I was under the impression that the Board would hold a trial or hearing of some kind where the pertinent facts would be discussed, investigated, and then a decision would be arrived at. However, upon appearing before the Board, I was informed by Colonel Nagle, a fine efficient officer, sternly and with emphasis that this was a closed court, and was not open to counsel. I demurred, but could not force my way into the hearing. However, I was permitted by the grace of the authorities to stand in the doorway and bear witness to the proceedings. Both my client Zilinsky and another chap by the name of Volk appeared and in my humble opinion, instead of calling it a hearing, it would better be called or more fittingly called an inquisition. The men were not permitted to discuss their case, but were grilled mercilessly, insulted unnecessarily because they claimed they were conscientious objectors, and questions were asked of them that had nothing whatsoever to do with the matters at issue other than to belittle and embarrass these unfortunate unrepresented men. After a somewhat perfunctory hearing, the Board dismissed these men, and I later learned that their status as conscientious objectors was rejected.

In all fairness to the military authorities, to the Crown and in justice to all parties, including the accused, there was no such thing as an investigation or even a hearing. It was all a farce, and the men simply told to leave. On appearing before the Magistrate Lacert he was sentenced to 12 months in jail.

With such a shortage of manpower, farm help being in such great demand in this country, it is indeed a pity that these men, who for no reason other than they have a conscience, and would rather obey their conscience, submit to any punishment, are denied their rights as citizens and as men and are taken from work which they are willing to do and know well and placed for one year to spend their time in jail in useless and unnecessary labour, when they could perform a useful service in garnering the crop which is so badly needed by Canada and the United Nations.

I am not debating the rights and wrongs of their beliefs, nor are we able to do so. The fact that we do not agree with them does not alter their rights and privileges. The law particularly exempts men from bearing arms who are conscientious objectors, and in order to decide such an issue, the matter should be investigated in the presence of counsel and not before a closed Board of inquiry no matter how eminent or how fair-minded that Board or its members might be.⁴¹

There seems to have been nothing the National Selective Service Board could do to remedy the situation without releasing the Board Chairman Judge J.E. Adamson. And it is rather doubtful, given the nature of the regulations, that such a drastic action would have even been considered. Adamson continued to operate at times with his heavy-handed tactics and the conscientious

objectors in Manitoba simply learned to live with the consequences, even though in numerous cases it meant going to jail.

In September of 1943 a change in the regulations was issued. It pleased some members of the Mennonite community but horrified others. The change referred back to the *Russlaender* efforts at the beginning of the war to develop a non-combatant medical corps within the military, staffed by conscientious objectors. On September 16, 1943, the Order in Council PC 7251 was proclaimed. This order established that:

Any person who has been found by a Mobilization Board... to be a member of the denomination of Christians called Mennonites or a member of the Community of Doukhobors..., or to conscientiously object by reason of religious training and belief to war in any form and to participation in combatant military service in which he might be required to take human life, may, for the purpose of performing any non-combatant service or duty with the Royal Army Medical Corps or the Canadian Dental Corps, be enlisted into an active Unit or Formation of the Canadian Army.⁴²

For the *Russlaender*, whom B.B. Janz represented, this Order in Council represented the successful culmination of many years of struggle and work with the federal government. Similar to an agreement they had worked out with the Russian government during World War I, they now felt satisfied that they could be involved in a service which their "English" neighbors would respect. The letter which B.B. Janz sent to the National Selective Service following this announcement reflected this positive response.

The Order in Council P.C. 7251 of September 16, 1943 at last has given realization to our deliberations, yours and mine, from November 1940 to establish a medical corps of C.O.'s.

I realize you have done your best to bring about this service and feel very much obliged.

It is to be hoped that this new order of service will settle many difficulties in the C.O. question, even those when a young man by error or mistake has been pressed for the fighting forces.⁴³

But for others in the Mennonite community, particularly the *Kanadier*, represented by the *Aeltestenkomitee*, the response was vastly different from that of Janz's. In a letter to the National Selective Service the *Komitee* voiced its chagrin over what P.C. 7251 represented to them.

We have the desire to inform you that we are representing especially the first Mennonite Settlers and their descendants in Manitoba and other Provinces.

Now we have read about an Order-in-Council regards [sic.] a non-combatant Medical Corps or Dental Corp, allowing a Conscientious Objector to enlist in the Army without bearing arms.

Our churches have very carefully studied the above mentioned Order and have informed us that they cannot favour it. It is against our conscience to be a member of the Army, to be under military law and take military obligations.

It is our hearty desire, Honourable Sir, that our young men may not be recruited for the above mentioned Unit. Although we are willing to do Alternative Service and most of our young men are doing so already.⁴⁴

According to J.A. Toews, only 227 conscientious objectors actually served in the Canadian Army under this provision. Perhaps it came a bit late in the war. Or, perhaps, its popularity was overestimated by the *Russlaender*, Janz, and the military and Selective Service administrations in Ottawa, since the actual number taking advantage of this opportunity is only a very small percentage of the 10,851 conscientious objectors in all of Canada.⁴⁵

Over the next several years Adamson remained untiring in his campaign against conscientious objectors. In 1944 he began on a more aggressive scale to convince conscientious objectors of the fallacy of their argument. His thinking on this matter is revealed in a letter of March 10, 1944, to Rev. L.R. Sherman to whom he was also submitting a copy of a manuscript which he had encouraged a good friend of his, Dr. Herbert William Wadge, to write. It is of some interest to understand the background of Wadge and why he would go to such lengths in preparing a manuscript for Adamson on this subject.

Herbert William Wadge was a Winnipeg medical doctor. During the World War I he served overseas with the R.C.A.M.C. and was awarded the Military Cross and Bar. Returning to Winnipeg after the war, he served for a time as the commanding officer of the Manitoba Military Hospital and later as president of the medical section of the recruiting board in World War II. He later also became the medical advisor of the Mobilization Board and worked alongside Adamson.⁴⁶

In his letter to Rev. L.R. Sherman, Adamson provided his rationale for all the time and energy expended by both Wadge and himself in preparing this treatise. He wrote:

In this Division of the Mobilization Branch of National Selective Service, which comprise all of Manitoba and the district of Keewatin, there are a large number of persons who claim as Conscientious Objectors and object to bearing arms. To date we have allowed between twenty-five hundred to three thousand as such. A large majority of these are of the Mennonite faith. There are also some Plymouth Brethren, Christadelphians and a good many Jehovah's Witnesses.

In time of war it would appear that these people become more active than usual and tend to propagate their doctrines more than in ordinary times. No answer is being made to their propaganda. Many of them are sincere but many of them are simply without information and it would seem that there should be some answer and some information of an authoritative nature to offset this propaganda.

This is not only important to those who claim as C.O.'s, it is important for our own boys who have been brought up as Christians and who are in the forces, to know what the answer is to "Thou shalt not kill."

Major Wadge, who is the Medical Advisor to the Mobilization Board of this Division and who is a biblical student, has, at my suggestion, prepared a thesis, a copy of which I now enclose.⁴⁷

Not only was Adamson attempting to get the larger religious community to accept Wadge's arguments, but he expended considerable energy in attempting to get the administration in Ottawa to use the book as a basis for dealing with conscientious objectors as well. He sent a copy to MacNamara

along with a copy of his own brief paper on conscientious objectors, as well as a copy of an article written by P.C. Locke during World War I against Mennonites. Adamson proposed to MacNamara that the National Selective Service publish Wadge's book and that a copy of it be placed in all conscientious objector camps and in jails where conscientious objectors were serving time. He also suggested that it be distributed to Mennonite leaders and to all Mobilization Boards in Canada, with the biblical quotations in script or heavy black print.⁴⁸

In deference to Adamson, MacNamara circulated the manuscript among various department officials and elicited their reactions. In a memo to MacNamara, L.E. Westman, quite familiar with the Mennonite situation throughout the war and with the arguments both for and against conscientious objection wrote:

... this material, while excellent as a private printing effort or publishing enterprise, could not possibly be sponsored, endorsed or printed or even multigraphed by the Department.

The question of interpreting the scriptures is strictly not a function of the government of Canada....⁴⁹

Continually on the lookout for additional material to advance his position against conscientious objectors, Adamson also circulated a three-page letter written by Samuel Logan Brengle of the Salvation Army among the administration in Ottawa. The letter was written to a troubled soldier on the question of "Killing in Battle—Is it Murder?" In the letter one paragraph sums up the point which Brengle is making and which, certainly, was the point which Adamson hoped to make to all reading the letter.

So a soldier, fighting not with any thought of personal vengeance but only in the interests of humanity and the sacred, inalienable rights of men, does not murder when he kills, but is God's minister and is doing an awful but a righteous service.⁵⁰

It is of considerable interest that at the bottom of the letter Adamson placed a small note in capital letters. Whether or not he had copies of this letter made and circulated among conscientious objectors or actually had the young men who came before him read this letter is not clear. The note, however, sums up his intention. It appears to be direct intimidation.

ALL THOSE APPLYING FOR POSTPONEMENT AS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS MUST READ THIS ARTICLE PRIOR TO APPEARING BEFORE THE BOARD.⁵¹

Following the conclusion of the war Adamson summarized his work on the Mobilization Board during the war years. To MacNamara he sent some rough calculations of how many and who the conscientious objectors were that had appeared before him.

Roughly, we have had 3,200 Conscientious Objectors. Roughly, 100 of these had their status changed. Roughly, two-thirds of these, or 2,000, have been out working on farms or in industry other than with their families or on their own farms under direction. I believe we have had here about forty percent of the Conscientious Objectors in the Dominion. Roughly, I should say that ninety percent of our Conscientious Objectors are of the Mennonite faith, perhaps five percent are Hutterites and the other five percent Jehovah's Witnesses and other miscellaneous faiths.⁵²

Together with his friend Wadge he had by this time apparently on his own published Wadge's manuscript in Winnipeg. In March of 1946 he wrote to MacNamara again, this time enclosing a copy of the published manuscript.

I enclose you herewith a copy of *Should a Christian Fight?* which I have encouraged Major Wadge to prepare and publish and to which I have written a short introduction.

It may be of use to you and to your Department in the next war, and perhaps it will do something towards a general understanding which will keep our people on the right path.⁵³

A brief note on the book is in order. Published in March of 1946, it is replete with scriptural references, and in addition to its 30 chapters has an appendix of all Old and New Testament quotations, an index of key words and an index of phrases. In total the paperback book comprises 231 pages. The introduction was written by Adamson.

MacNamara circulated his copy of the book among various department officials in Ottawa. Various memos were received by MacNamara in response. One, generally complimentary of the work MacNamara and his department had done, stated cynically:

After a concentrated 15 minutes' engagement with the book, I return it herewith at the earliest moment to enable you to pass it on to some other eager minds. The author quotes scripture profusely to prove that there is no valid basis for recognition of the status of a C.O. but unfortunately the fact is that there are C.O.'s who are no use to the Army and whom the Army don't (sic.) want. Some means has to be devised to keep them out of the Army and civil jails without outraging the public conscience. You have done this most successfully and the Red Cross should make you a knight templar or at any rate give you a set of jewelled spurs.

As to the future use of the book, why not send complimentary copies to the Mennonite bishops, the Watchtower organization and the Doukhobor Elders with Easter Greetings.⁵⁴

The issue came to an official end when by Order in Council, P.C. 3030, tabled in the House of Commons on July 23, 1946, control over postponed conscientious objectors for alternative service was ended on August 15, 1946.⁵⁵

Perhaps no one has summed up the story of conscientious objectors from the government's point of view better than did L.E. Westman in a letter to MacNamara on May 10, 1945.

Have you noticed the rather extraordinary interest in what Conscientious Objectors do and what we do about them in the minds of nearly all provincial officials and a great many of our own people who have really nothing to do with them. It is significant to me that this CO business is way out of balance in our thinking. The subject seems to be a fascinating topic to all sorts of people and, if we can get it dropped without calling undue attention to ourselves, we will be lucky. I am afraid that our own people including the Mobilization Boards have done about as much to keep it stirred up as has the public.⁵⁶

For Manitoba Mennonites the end of the war brought much needed relief. Their experience with Adamson was but a short, dark paragraph in a much larger story. This was naturally the case for Mennonite conscientious objectors since for many of them their encounter with Adamson lasted less than five minutes. Following his judgement upon their conscience, it was other authorities with whom they had to deal.

Even before the end of the war most of the young men who had served in Alternative Service camps, the military, or spent time in jail, had returned home. A difficult chapter in their lives had come to a close and a new one was beginning. By the end of the war both the Mennonite communities and the Mennonite people had changed considerably. No longer were Mennonites as isolated as they had been before the war. Better roads, more cars, better systems of communication had changed all that. The farm was also no longer the attraction it had once been. No longer did the young men wish to stay home and work with their fathers. Jobs beckoned from the city, education was more readily available, young people were enticed into new careers throughout Canada. The farm took on second-place status—the last resort if nothing else worked out.

Since so many young Mennonite men had entered the military, their communities were faced with the difficult dilemma of how best to welcome them back into their churches. For some churches only an outright admission of guilt and an apology before the congregation brought acceptance. For some young men it no longer mattered. Either they joined other non-Mennonite congregations or they left the church entirely.

The war, the Mobilization Board, and Judge Adamson had left their imprint upon the church and community. Both the *Russlaender* and the *Kanadier* realized that they had failed in teaching their interpretation of the fundamental doctrine of nonresistance. They realized that their inability to work together on an alternative service program at the beginning of the war was a poor testimonial to peaceful resolution of conflict. Adamson's actions had brought the Mennonites face to face with their lack of unity and ability to resolve conflict. He had also served as a wedge within the Manitoba Mennonite community by exposing the inconsistent responses of young men from both immigrant groups.

Undoubtedly the real culprit, if one must be found, would be the slow response of the National War Services Board in developing sufficient and appropriate alternative service opportunities. With the knowledge that the

conscientious objectors would be involved in beneficial civilian work, rather than going back to their homes and farms while others served in the military, Adamson as well as other judges might have been more lenient in granting postponements to the young men before them. But, as it was, Adamson in particular was trapped on three sides: his own convictions, the convictions of the Mennonites, and the slow response of the Ottawa bureaucracy. He and the Mobilization Board he directed were thus led to a head-on confrontation with both groups of Manitoba Mennonites with the result that the Mennonites were unable to unite on the issue of alternative service and remained a divided community throughout the war. As far as Judge Adamson is concerned, his personality, objectives and tactics are still remembered by Mennonites of Manitoba.

Notes

¹James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789-1889)" (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1978), 77-78.

²*Ibid.*, 656.

³A good treatment of this experience is found in Lawrence Klippenstein, "Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia: A Case Study in Church-State Relations: 1789-1936" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1984).

⁴An analysis of the tension between these two groups is provided in David Warren Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection in World War II" (M.A. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1977).

⁵Specifically they consented to work in national parks, road work or work on farms, under civilian supervision. This was agreed upon by the *Aeltestenkomitee* at their meeting on January 24, 1941, in Winnipeg. David P. Reimer, *Experiences of the Mennonites in Canada during the Second World War 1939-1945*. (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., n.d.), 81-82.

⁶*Winnipeg Free Press*, 22 December, 1961.

⁷*Winnipeg Tribune*, 22 December 1961.

⁸These figures were calculated from a list compiled by Helen Epp from the personnel records of the Department of National Defence. Since only the Air Force specifically designated an individual's religious affiliation, a "Mennonite" was determined by his name and place of residence. Though the method is obviously less than ideal, it is probably the most accurate to this point. The figures were sent to the author by Marlene Epp, Waterloo, Ontario, in late November, 1988.

⁹Fransen, p. 45.

¹⁰"Conscientious Objector Pleas Being Heard," *The Winnipeg Free Press* (December 19, 1940): 8.

¹¹"Conscientious Objectors," unpublished and undated paper, D.W. Friesen Files, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg, Volume 601.

¹²Herbert W. Wadge, *Should a Christian fight? The Position of Conscientious Objectors* (Winnipeg, MB: Hignell Printing Limited, 1946). More will be said about this book later.

¹³Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 133.

¹⁴"Mennonites and War Work: Speech by Honourable Mr. Justice Adamson Delivered to the Mennonites at Steinbach, Manitoba, May 29, 1941," *The Western Canadian*, Manitou, Manitoba, May 29, 1941.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷David Warren Fransen, "We Must Bring Christian Pressure to Bear: Mennonites and Alternative Service During the Second World War," 23. An unpublished paper presented at the Mennonite History Symposium, May 23, 1987, Winnipeg. Study Papers, Box 16, Folder C, Number 1, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, Winnipeg.

¹⁸NAC, P.A. Toews, David Schulz and J.F. Barkman to J.T. Thorson, July 9, 1941. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service," Record Group 27, Volume 986, File 1, Ottawa.

¹⁹NAC, J.E. Adamson to J.T. Thorson, August 25, 1941. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 986, File 1, Ottawa.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²NAC, L.R. LaFleche to J.E. Adamson, August 25, 1941. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 986, File 1, Ottawa.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites," 146-147.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶NAC, memorandum from L.R. LaFleche to the Minister J.T. Thorson, November 6, 1941. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 986, File 1, Ottawa.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Reimer, "Experiences," 90.

³⁰Reimer, "Experiences," 92-93.

³¹Both the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote* carried articles that informed their Mennonite readers across Canada and the United States of what was happening in Manitoba. With the information came appeals for funds to help the Mennonite lobby in Ottawa. A good example is the article "Ein Aufruf an unsere Gemeinden und Gruppen," *Der Bote*, (January 21, 1941): 2.

³²Reimer, "Experiences," 92-93.

³³NAC, R.G. Warnock, "Memorandum for the file Re: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors," January 21, 1942. "Department of Labour, National War Services" files, Record Group 27, Volume 986, File 1, Ottawa.

³⁴NAC, C.F. Klassen and David Toews to J.T. Thorson, September 28, 1942. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 991, 2-101-1, Ottawa.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶NAC, Adamson to Major-General L.R. LaFleche, October 24, 1942. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 993, 2.101-9, pt. 1, Ottawa.

³⁷NAC, Mackenzie King to L.R. LaFleche, October 29, 1942. "National War Services, Administrative Division J" files, Record Group 44, Box 8, Ottawa.

³⁸NAC, C.F. Klassen to Arthur MacNamara, May 12, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 127, 601.3-1-10, Ottawa.

³⁹NAC, Arthur MacNamara to J.E. Adamson, May 19, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 127, 601.3-1-10, Ottawa.

⁴⁰NAC, B.E. Lewis to Arthur MacNamara, September 1, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 127, 601.3-1-10, Ottawa.

⁴¹NAC, brief by L.D. Morosnick to Arthur MacNamara, August 28, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 127, 601.3-1-10, Ottawa.

⁴²NAC, P.C. 7251, proclaimed September 16, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 36, File 4, Ottawa.

⁴³NAC, B.B. Janz to L.R. LaFleche, October 25, 1943. "National War Services, Administrative Division J" files, Record Group 44, Box 8, Acc. 85-86/537 Shelf 490, Ottawa.

⁴⁴NAC, Peter A. Toews, David Schulz and J. Barkman to L.E. Westman, November 3, 1943. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 991, File 2-101-1, Ottawa.

⁴⁵J.A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada During World War II* (Winnipeg, MB: Publication Committee of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1959), 95.

⁴⁶"Obituary," *Winnipeg Tribune*, June 15, 1954.

⁴⁷NAC, J.E. Adamson to Rev. L.R. Sherman, March 10, 1944. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 132, 601.3-6, Volume 4, Ottawa.

⁴⁸NAC, J.E. Adamson to Arthur MacNamara, May 10, 1945. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-2, Ottawa.

⁴⁹NAC, L.E. Westman to Arthur MacNamara, March 27, 1944. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 132, 601.3-6, Volume 4, Ottawa.

⁵⁰NAC, letter by Samuel Logan Brengle, n.d., "Killing in Battle - Is it Murder?" "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 132, 601.3-6, Volume 4, Ottawa.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²NAC, J.E. Adamson to Arthur MacNamara, September 8, 1945. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-2, Ottawa.

⁵³NAC, J.E. Adamson to Arthur MacNamara, March 13, 1946. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-1, Ottawa.

⁵⁴NAC, A. H. Brown to Arthur MacNamara, March 29, 1946. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-1, Ottawa.

⁵⁵NAC, memo by G.R. Carroll to Alternative Service Workers in Alternative Service Work Camps. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-2, Ottawa.

⁵⁶NAC, L.E. Westman to Arthur MacNamara, May 10, 1945. "Department of Labour, National Selective Service" files, Record Group 27, Volume 3058, 21-25-2, Ottawa.